

ANIMALS

by
Roy W. Penn

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do."

—*Romans 7:15*

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

—*Lord Acton, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton*

Three and a half billion kilometers from the white star, space rippled and flowed. If there had been humans present to see, they would have found the sight very uncomfortable, since their brains were not programmed to comprehend such a phenomenon. At least, not instinctively.

The rippling grew sharply defined, then suddenly there was a spaceship present where before there had been nothing. A stubby cylinder riding in front of a long boom, followed by a massive, starkly functional construct at the rear, it possessed very little intrinsic beauty. But it did the job it was designed to do.

Now there were humans present.

Harry Jacobs looked up from his console at the distant, brilliant white pea and squinted. Then he grinned. "Looks like we made it," he announced to no one in particular. "Right smack where we wanted." He glanced over to another man floating at a nearby station and peering at a screen readout. "What do you think, Padre?"

Don Wilder chuckled. Five years ago he had been a full-fledged Catholic priest, before changing jobs. It wasn't that he'd had an attack of atheism or anything, but rather, that he had felt the Call of the Great Unknown and decided to go explore the universe. Since International Astronautical Commission starships did not include chaplains in their official crew rosters, he had chosen to formally switch to his other favorite vocation. He was the on-board astrophysicist.

"I think you're right," he told Harry. He in turn glanced over to yet another station, this one located in the center of the circular, domed bridge of the ship. "We can start looking for planets any time you say so, Captain," he said.

The captain nodded and gave Wilder a thumbs-up signal. "Go for it," he said. He turned his attention over to Harry. "Mr. Jacobs, if everything's clear outside, bring us up to a quarter-gee. Might as well get some weight under foot. Maybe the dingle-dogs will stop puking and Lisa will get off my case," he added with a grumble.

The ship was the captain's first command. Originally christened *Explorer III* by some unimaginative desk-bound bureaucrat back on Earth, it had barely left orbit on its maiden voyage when the crew scratched their collective heads and came up with a new name. At their first stop, three able spacers had gone outside and wiped out the original plain block lettering and replaced it with the ship's new appellation, this time in flowery, flowing script. It was now the *Lola*. The captain loved it.

The *Lola* had just come from the eighteenth star system visited since leaving man's home world. Like most of their stopping places, it had proven interesting only to geologists and other scientists who got a kick out of radiation blasted rocks and poisonous gases. Fortunately for the biologists on board, they had managed to find two systems earlier in their voyage with worlds containing life. Fortunately for the captain, too; up until that point those same biologists had been driving him up the wall looking for something to do besides sit in the lab and twiddle their thumbs.

One of those two worlds had turned out to be that rarest of phenomena, a planet close enough to Earth conditions that they could walk on its surface without spacesuits. It was there that they had found the small, canine-like creatures that seemed to have the same kind of natural affinity for humans as Man's

Best Friend back home. They were relatively tall and narrow, with spindly legs, and someone had started calling them "dingle-dogs". The name stuck. They had three specimens on board, and they did not like zero-gravity. The captain could understand perfectly well why Lisa and her gang were starting to go stir-crazy again.

"One can always hope..." Padre Don told him. Wilder's smile faded. "I don't think we're going to have any luck this time," he added.

"Why not?" the captain demanded. Here we go again...

"Already found one planet at about the right distance. Problem is it's pretty big. Probably Jupiter-sized or more. That's how we found it so fast."

The captain muttered a curse. Twenty-four hours and Lisa will start sticking her head out the airlock just for the novelty of it. "Well, keep looking, anyway. Besides, it might be kind of fun to look at something that big that close in," he added, trying to find a bright side.

Wilder snorted. "There're plenty of those," he said. "*Miranda* looked at three of them." *Carmen Miranda*, originally named *Explorer II*, had returned to Earth two years ago, brimming with exciting news, and recruitment had taken an order-of-magnitude jump.

"Yeah, Padre, but they were all really close in. Closer than Mercury. This is the first one that isn't either sitting in the star's lap or out in the frozen beyond. Might be interesting..."

"If you say so, Captain." Wilder shook his head and went back to work. The captain sighed and relaxed in his chair, twiddling his thumbs.

* * *

The captain's name was James Cherry. This was his second deep space mission. His first had been on *Explorer I*, originally christened without the addition of the numeral. Since its name had been unique at the time, nobody had bothered to change it. It had been the first of its class, and only the third starship built by the human race. The first had been essentially a jury-rigged space shuttle with a quantum drive engine wedged into the cargo bay. The second had been a frightful looking kludge pieced together in orbit, and the first to actually do some exploring. The *Explorer* class was the first set of starships designed from the ground up.

He had been Lieutenant Cherry on that first flight. At that time, starships had been primarily crewed by military personnel, with a sprinkling of civilian scientists. By the time *Explorer II* was commissioned, the International Astronautical Commission had become an independent entity in its own right. The majority of crewmembers still had a military background, but the IAC no longer kowtowed to any nation's armed services.

Maybe someday the eggheads will come up with some systematic way of exploring the heavens, Captain Cherry thought with a sigh as he relaxed in his chair. A quarter-gee was very comfortable. The current hit-and-miss method of essentially telling the helmsman to go "thataway" had produced a few interesting results, but Cherry was sure that there was probably a better way of selecting candidate stars for exploration. Not that he minded terribly. Under the current system he got to pick whatever destinations he felt like. Normally, he asked people like Don Wilder for advice, but he was the one who made the final decision. If the system ever changed he would probably be given a list and told to stick

to the itinerary like a dog on a leash.

They were no longer three and a half billion kilometers from the star. Padre Don's stargazers had first determined the plane of this system's ecliptic, then quickly found five more planets in addition to the huge monster he'd already spotted. Three of them were just more gas giants, and pretty big ones at that. The smallest had at least the mass of Saturn, and the biggest was almost a brown dwarf. The other two planets were foul balls of hot rock and stinking poison orbiting closer in. Probably a couple of Venus-like horrors, Cherry told himself sourly.

It was at that point that Cherry had ordered another quantum micro-shift, taking them within twenty million kilometers of the original giant world. They were now approaching it gently, using the fusion drive. They could have come in more quickly if Cherry had been inclined to step on the gas, but the scientists were content with the low acceleration. It gave them more time to examine things from a distance. And if they found anything interesting, it would be easier to modify their trajectory if they weren't already grazing the planet's atmosphere.

"I don't think it's a gas giant." Wilder announced from his science station.

Cherry glanced up from his musings. "Why not, Padre?" he asked.

"Too dense," was Wilder's answer. He came over, touched the captain's console, and brought up some figures. "See? For that mass it should be bigger if it's a gas giant."

Cherry whistled softly. "If you're right, that's one mama of a terrestrial planet. I never knew rocks came that big." He glanced up and beyond the dome, where the huge planet showed a visible gibbous phase amidst the stars that dotted the heavens. The sun was out of sight below the dome's horizon.

"It's probably got a degenerate matter core. Hotter than heck, too. Surface atmospheric pressure is probably a thousand times Earth-normal."

The captain grinned. "Remind me not to pick it for my next vacation."

Wilder chuckled. "Not one of the great fun spots in the universe." He tapped the console again. "Now here's the really interesting thing," he said.

Cherry studied the schematic. "That's a moon," he said. "A big moon." Again he glanced up. From this distance it was still impossible to tell which of those points of light near the planet was the body in question.

"Bigger than Earth."

"With an atmosphere."

"Not at all like Earth," Padre Don pointed out.

"Yeah," Cherry agreed. "Methane, ammonia, carbon monoxide... Hunh? Chlorine?" He looked up.

"That is a puzzler," Wilder agreed.

"I see why you said it's interesting..." the captain murmured. "Where is it coming from?"

Chlorine fell in the same class as oxygen when it came to planetary atmospheres. Both were highly reactive gases. Under just about any imaginable conditions, they could not exist in a pure elemental state. Not without some source to replenish them. On Earth, that source was life.

"Could there be some kind of life down there that uses chlorine the way we use oxygen?" the captain inquired.

Wilder shrugged. "Who knows? So far, we've only found life that uses oxygen like ourselves."

Which was true. *Explorer I* had found the first living extraterrestrial world, and *Carmen Miranda* had found no less than four. Add to that Earth and the two that the *Lola* had already spotted, it made a total of eight known planets hosting life. Human beings could walk around without environmental suits on three of them, and only needed breathing filters on two more. But even on the planets containing additional, hostile ingredients in their atmospheres, the life that was present metabolized oxygen. On all eight worlds, chlorine would be a universal, deadly poison.

Cherry thought for a moment, glanced at the readout, then back to the Padre. "You haven't picked up anything, have you? Radio transmissions? Lights on the night side? Anything like that?"

Wilder shook his head. "Nothing. Well, actually, we can't tell about night side lighting. The cloud cover is too thick." He tapped the screen and the data readouts vanished, to be replaced by a telescopic image of another gibbous disk, this one a smooth, white pearl. The captain frowned.

The Padre chuckled softly. "Most likely, it's something we haven't encountered yet. Volcanic gases or some chemical reaction. The planet gets enough solar radiation. We've estimated the surface temperature at about eighty Celsius."

"At the equator?"

"Pretty much everywhere. Atmospheric pressure is around thirty-three bars. Heat conduction does a pretty good job of evening things out."

"Hmm... Sort of like Venus."

"Exactly. But not quite as hot."

"Still," the captain mused, "I don't think we'll be sending down any landing parties. I think we'll settle for an unmanned probe or two. If we lose 'em, screw 'em."

Wilder nodded and turned away. As he did, he nearly collided with Carole Evans, who had just come up from below decks and was approaching the captain's post.

"What's up, Carole?" Cherry asked.

She grabbed Padre Don's sleeve as he tried to slip past. "Actually, I wanted to talk to both of you," she said, tugging him back toward the center seat.

Cherry looked at her questioningly as Wilder acquiesced. "What is it?"

She held up a data tablet and activated the screen. "Actually, I'm not quite sure what to make of it," she began. An image appeared; black space sprinkled with a few stars. In the middle, an irregular spot of

light appeared, wavering and pulsating. "At first we thought it was a solar flare," she continued, "but it wasn't anywhere near the sun. It lasted about forty seconds, then just disappeared." As if on cue, the light dimmed and vanished.

Both men studied the screen as Carole replayed the sequence. "Weird," Captain Cherry finally murmured. "Any ideas, Padre?"

He shook his head. "Not the slightest." He cocked his head slightly and pursed his lips. "Of course, we are near a big planet with a pretty big magnetosphere—"

"Hunh? At this distance?"

The astrophysicist smiled. "Back home, Jupiter's magnetosphere is so big that if it were visible and you could see it from Earth, it would be bigger than the moon in the sky. This one's even bigger. We're well inside it."

Cherry glanced around, then down at himself as if he almost expected to see lines of force emanating from his belly. "Okay," he said. "Let me know if you figure anything out."

Wilder's smile widened. "That's what we're out here for."

With that, he and Carole Evans headed back for the science labs.

* * *

"You know, this magnetosphere is really weird."

Captain Cherry nodded wearily as he walked into the science lab. After eight hours on the bridge it was nice to see that the rest of the ship was real and not just an abstraction at the other end of console circuits.

"Harry Jacobs just spent the last half-hour telling me the same thing," he said. "It's making it hard to navigate."

"Screws up your alignment vectors," Wilder agreed. "So maybe we just go in a straight line for now."

"That's what I'm thinking. At least we'll pass reasonably close to that moon. Anything new on it?"

The Padre went over and activated a wall screen. A schematic image appeared, all curved lines and numbers. He pointed to a spot where a bunch of the lines converged. "Just one thing," he said in answer to the captain's question. "It's definitely tied into the magnetosphere."

Cherry straightened up and went over for a closer look. "Holy crow," he muttered. "Looks like something my sister's kid drew when she was two years old."

"The big planet's a dipole, like you'd expect," Wilder went on, explaining. "But I've never seen anything like this. I've counted at least five pairs of poles, and they don't all line up, either. Really twists the heck out of things. No wonder the magnetosphere is so weird."

"How is it weird?"

Wilder shook his head. "You name it. Knots, reversals, cusps, waves... That's just for starters. I can't even begin to describe half of it."

"What about that flare Carole saw earlier?"

"There's a big knot near there. Some other stuff, too." He paused. "You know, when we get back, they'll probably make more out of this than either of those planets we found."

The captain smiled. "It's about time we got credit for something. Dingle-dogs..." he added in disgust. He thought for a moment, then added, "Are we going to pass near any of those knots or whatever?"

Wilder pointed to the screen. "In about an hour," he said. "There's a pretty big one up ahead. We should pass within a hundred klicks."

"Hmm... Do you think it's safe?"

"Well," the Padre replied musingly, "if you don't run right through it I don't see that we'd have any problems."

The captain chuckled. "Don't worry. I get enough excitement without that." With that, he turned and left.

Five minutes later, he was back on the bridge.

* * *

"I don't see a thing," Harry Jacobs grumbled.

"You're not supposed to," the captain chided. "What did you expect? Some swirling nebula with green streamers or something?"

"Nah," Harry said. "But it would be nice," he added with a grin. "Then I could take a real picture back to my folks."

"Maybe next time," Cherry sympathized. He reached over and punched the comm link. Don Wilder's face appeared.

"I was just about to call you, Captain," he said. "Something's come up. I wouldn't get too close to that magnetic anomaly if I were you."

"What's going on?" Cherry demanded.

"Doggoned if I know," came the reply. "But there's a lot of activity. Pretty strong activity. It could mess up some of our instruments."

"Thanks." The captain switched off the link and turned toward Jacobs. "You heard him, Harry," he said. "Nudge us away and bring thrust up to a half-gee."

"Roger," Jacobs replied. He reached out and began tapping contacts on his console. A few seconds later, he looked up in puzzlement. "Captain," he announced, "it's not responding."

Cherry swore softly. "Are you sure?" he asked.

Jacobs tapped the same controls, then reached over and tried to activate another one. "Yeah, I'm sure. Engine controls are dead, Captain."

Cherry swore again, this time louder, then punched another comm link channel, this time calling Engineering. "Fred," he said as soon as a face appeared, "we don't have control up here. We're pretty close to a big magnetic anomaly. Can you check things out? Meanwhile, steer us fifteen degrees at phi two-twenty and bring us up to a half-gee." The engineer's face vanished and the captain waited.

An insistent buzz from the panel got his attention. It was Wilder. "Captain," he said without preamble, "I recommend strongly that we get away from here now. Activity's gone off the charts. I still don't know what's going on, but we could get a flare any second."

Cherry stabbed the panel and Wilder's face vanished. The engineer's returned. "Don't tell me..." the captain began, noting the man's expression.

"It's not responding to us, either—" the face on the screen began.

"Never mind," the captain ordered. "Just shut it down completely. We're shifting out of here." He shut the link off without waiting for a reply. "Set it up, Harry," Cherry ordered. "Give us a micro-shift out to three billion kilometers."

Jacobs started to obey, then stopped. "Captain," he said. "We're turning." Cherry glanced up; the star field was slowly shifting.

He swore again. "I thought I told them—" Jacobs interrupted.

"We're turning toward the anomaly... It's like it's drawing us in..."

"Is it drawing us in?" the captain demanded.

Jacobs peered at his console. "No. We're just moving toward it. No change in acceleration."

Captain Cherry jabbed the link again. "What the devil are you doing down there?" he demanded. "We're moving toward that thing. I thought I told you to shut down!"

The engineer's face was red and flustered. "We're trying, Captain!" he snapped. "It's just not responding. It's like it's got a mind of its own!" The screen went blank again.

Wilder's head appeared in the stairwell and he bounded up into the bridge. "It's putting out coherent radiation emissions," he announced breathlessly. "It's like it's transmitting something at us."

Cherry felt an icy chill run through his body. "Something intelligent?" He looked up again. Still nothing but stars and the distant orbs of the planet and its moon. He squinted, instinctively trying to make out something invisible to the human eye.

The Padre nodded. "Sure looks like it."

Cherry pulled his gaze away and swore again. "Whatever it is, it looks like it's taken control of the ship. We can't turn or stop the engines."

"Captain! Look!"

Cherry's head swung around to see what Jacobs was yelling about. He was pointing overhead, through the dome. Cherry looked back up. "Holy crow..." he breathed.

For the sky was no longer black. Directly ahead, a brilliant point writhed and pulsed, searing the eye with mind-numbing, indefinable colors. Waves and streamers raced outward like ripples in a pond. He tried to turn away, but found that he couldn't. His neck muscles would no longer obey his brain. He tried to stand, but his legs were equally in rebellion.

Around him, everything else turned dim, then black. Sounds faded to nothing. He could no longer feel the chair he was sitting in. His entire world consisted of that single, terrifying point, nailed through his brain like an arrow through a bull's eye.

After a period of time not definable by human minds, even that faded away.

2

Pain.

Not specific pain. Not localized pain. Not even intense pain. Just pain.

James Cherry's awareness consisted of one thing; pain. He could not see, nor could he hear. It was as if he were a disembodied mind, a freely floating soul awash in a sea of pain. Pain that went on and on and on without surcease, for indefinable periods of time.

Heat.

Not specific heat. Not localized heat. Not even intense heat. Just heat.

James Cherry's awareness consisted of one thing; heat. He could not see, nor could he hear. It was as if he were a disembodied mind, a freely floating soul awash in a sea of heat. Heat that went on and on and on without surcease, for indefinable periods of time.

Ten trillion years passed, and it was one second later than before.

A second went by, and it was a week later than before.

James Jerry aware of was heat pain light bitter-tasting sweet-smelling fire his mind tried to grasp reality and failed failed failed no words for reality no words for anything...

"Hello, Jimmy."

The beautiful girl stood in front of him, dressed in a stunning evening gown. Karen... Karen, how could you... I loved you...

"Hello, Jimmy."

The beautiful girl's face crumpled into wrinkled age as her hair stiffened and turned white and fell out. Her hands were withered sticks attached to a decaying corpse. The evening gown fell away in tatters,

revealing monstrous dead flesh.

"Hello, Jimmy."

The beautiful girl was beautiful again, but her face wore an expression of agony. Which was perfectly understandable, since she was on fire. Flames ran up and down the white gown, licking her flesh and searing her soul. She spread her arms, and the flames mounted higher, turning her skin crisp and black. Slowly, she turned away.

"Good-bye, Jimmy... Good-bye, Jimmy... Good-bye, Jimmy..."

Pain.

Not specific pain. Not localized pain. Not even intense pain. Just pain.

James Cherry's awareness consisted of one thing; pain. He could not see, nor could he hear. It was as if he were a disembodied mind, a freely floating soul awash in a sea of pain. Pain that went on and on and on without surcease, for indefinable periods of time...

* * *

James Cherry opened his eyes.

"It's the captain!" he heard someone shout. The next instant, Don Wilder's face appeared, hovering over him, wearing an anxious expression. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Cherry blinked. For a moment, the words were just incomprehensible gibberish that made about as much sense as a dog barking. Then they fell into place as if someone had flipped a sequence of switches in his brain. Several more faces appeared in his field of vision.

He sat up suddenly. As he did, momentary recollections of movies and books where the hero sat up suddenly and nearly passed out from pain, exhaustion or weakness flashed through his mind. But nothing happened. He felt fine. In fact, he couldn't recall when he had ever felt better. Then he caught a glimpse of the surroundings behind the gathered crew. In spite of feeling well, a wave of weakness washed over him and he sank back down.

"Where in the devil are we?" he murmured.

Padre Don shook his head. "That's a good question."

The captain was lying on the floor in the middle of a reddish-white expanse that stretched for approximately thirty meters in all directions. After that, nothing. A sort of weird, silvery-gray dome stretched overhead, shot through with evanescent flickers of color. There was no furniture. Only the domed expanse, himself and the other crewmembers.

The other crewmembers?

He sat up again, this time counting faces. Besides himself and Wilder, there were five others present. One was Lisa Miller, a tall, statuesque redhead on her first mission. The others consisted of two engineers, the chef and another scientist.

"Where is everyone else?" he demanded. The *Lola* had a crew complement of twenty-five.

Wilder shook his head again. "That's another good question. Apparently, wherever you just were."

"And where was that?"

"Who knows?"

"How did I get here?"

"You just 'popped in'."

"Hunh?"

Lisa Miller took over. "I'm guessing I was the first. I was having some horrible dreams or something, then suddenly I was here. A little while later, Yoshi suddenly appeared where you are." She indicated one of the engineers.

"Then everyone else just 'appeared', too," Wilder finished for her.

"Oh." Captain Cherry paused for a moment. "Did you mention bad dreams?"

Lisa nodded

The chef spoke up. "Looks like we all had 'em, Cap'n," he drawled. He shuddered. "Like to make a body plumb crazy, it was," he added in a mutter.

"So it wasn't just me," the captain murmured. Something else came to mind. "How are you all feeling?" he asked.

Lisa held up an arm. "A couple of days ago one of the dingle-dogs scratched me. Oh, nothing serious. I think it was just playing. Right here." She indicated her inner forearm.

Cherry looked. All he could see was smooth, healthy skin. "There's nothing there," he finally said.

"That's right," Wilder put in. "Every one of us. Whatever was wrong with us isn't wrong any more." He smiled. "To tell the truth, I've never felt better in my life."

Cherry sat up again. "So, just what the devil is going on?" he said, staring off into space. He looked back at the Padre. "Someone's behind this, aren't they? Some alien intelligence."

Everyone nodded in unison.

"That seems to be the general consensus," Wilder agreed.

"And unless you're asking me to believe in rather unlikely coincidence, they're probably from that planet we were approaching, Right?"

Again the nods.

"Either that or that moon," Wilder said. "Personally, I tend to think it was the moon."

The captain shook his head in semi-disbelief. "Kind of hard to believe anything could live on either one of those places," he muttered.

"The chlorine."

"Yeah," Cherry agreed. "I remember." He looked up and around. "So, do you think that's where we are? On that moon somewhere inside some kind of... Oh, I don't know. Holding cell? Prison?"

"Laboratory?" Lisa put in softly.

"Whatever," Wilder said with a sigh, "they've got technology considerably in advance of anything we've ever imagined."

Captain Cherry chuckled. "Oh, I don't know about that. Fiction writers have a pretty good imagination."

"True," Wilder admitted. "But those who stick to 'real science' probably never dreamed up anything like this." He smiled. "I believe this may qualify as the mythical 'science so advanced that it seems like magic'."

"Just our luck," Lisa put in sourly. "The first intelligent aliens we find, and they're so far above us we can't even begin to understand them."

"Oh, I wouldn't say it's so unlikely," Padre Don put in. "No matter how you think intelligent races come about,"—he smiled briefly; everyone knew that his views of biology were unconventional—"what are the odds that any two came into existence at anywhere near the same time? Even a difference of a hundred thousand years could easily mean the difference between us and..." he spread his hands, "this. Maybe even less."

Cherry levered himself to his feet and took a few experimental steps. Wilder was right; he felt better than he could ever remember feeling before. He took a few deep lungfuls of air. It was good. No trace of anything toxic or even noxious. "Well, they seem to be taking good care of—" Several simultaneous exclamations cut him off. He whirled around.

There, lying on the floor where he had just been, was Harry Jacobs.

3

Whatever it was—prison, laboratory, zoo, or something completely unknown to human experience—it was pleasant. Jim Cherry leaned back against the tree trunk, relaxing, enjoying the cool breeze and wonderful pine smells of the forest. Overhead, birds chirruped and squirrels quarreled over cones. Off in the distance, he spied Harry Jacobs and Lisa Miller walking together along a paved path between the modern, dormitory-style building and the sports court. He thought back over events of the past month.

After waking up in the dome-shaped room and finding himself in excellent health, he had watched as the rest of his crew popped into existence, one after another, just as he had. Nearly everyone had had nightmares, although their experiences had varied. There had been a couple of notable exceptions, such as Harry Jacobs, who had reported pleasant, if incomprehensible, dreams. It made sense to no one.

Only a couple of hours after the last crewmember appeared, the room had suddenly vanished. Cherry

had found himself floating in nothingness, not even aware of his own breathing. It was neither light nor dark, but a total absence of sensation such as the human brain cannot even envision. It had not been pleasant. Fortunately, it hadn't lasted long. Or, at least, it hadn't seemed to. After an immeasurable period of time, he had suddenly found himself lying on a carpet of soft, green grass, with a blue sky overhead.

Although it was impossible, for a moment he had thought he was back on Earth. The greenery and temperature were reminiscent of summers at his boyhood home near the coast of Washington state, just north of Aberdeen, and he felt an instant pang of homesickness.

It didn't last. Within a half-hour he had encountered nearly half of the crew complement from the *Lola*, and seen more different environments than he thought possible jammed into a smaller area than he thought possible. Within another half-hour they had discovered the habitation complex, consisting of the dormitory, sports court, refectory, and several other small buildings.

The complex was... well... interesting. Many of the buildings bore a certain resemblance to places Cherry had known back home. And he wasn't the only crewmember to feel that way. After a while, it became obvious that it was some kind of conglomeration designed from memories taken from each of them. Even the environments were that way. Olympic rainforest, drawn from Cherry's mind, stood next to vast, open Midwestern plains from Lisa Miller's youth. Beyond that laid the southwestern deserts that Mike Huelga had grown up in. And so forth.

It hadn't taken them long to discover that there was a bit of futuristic technology mixed in with the ordinary. At first, Cherry had been astonished to see what looked like replicator stations straight out of Star Trek serials. They did not work like the Trek originals, however. One did not use voice commands. Instead, the replicators were keyed to thought patterns—but with limits. Cherry could, for instance, order any kind of food that titillated his taste buds. But when he tried to replicate a circuit board, he struck out. Likewise with weapons or anything that he might use to investigate his surroundings on a more scientific basis.

So they didn't starve. On the contrary, Cherry was annoyed to notice that his waistline was starting to bulge. I've got to exercise more, he told himself. Enough of just lying around beneath the pine trees and enjoying the smells. Perhaps he could interest a few of the others in some basketball... Well, even if not, this northwestern rainforest had plenty of hiking paths. He had gone out exploring a couple of times, but never seriously. He thought fondly back to all the Olympic trails he used to hike in his youth. At least here he wouldn't need a Northwest Forest Pass.

It wasn't exactly like Earth. Even without any scientific instruments, some things were obviously different. The sun was smaller and whiter, just like the one that they had been visiting when captured. There was no moon, although a couple of tiny but brilliant objects performed a cyclical dance across the sky. Don Wilder was convinced that they were the giant planet and moon that they had been investigating. It was a possibility, Cherry admitted. And the constellations and star patterns bore no resemblance whatsoever to the familiar terrestrial heavens.

It was enough to convince Wilder and several other scientists that they were really on some planet somewhere, and not just dreaming it all. "Dreaming" had been the favorite theory upon their first arrival, largely because what they found seemed so improbable. Wilder's question—"If there is an Earth-type planet around, how come we never spotted it?"—remained unanswered.

Whatever kind of planet it was, it certainly possessed unusual characteristics. A couple of weeks ago,

three crewmembers had taken off on a lark, intending to "get as far away from here as possible," as they put it. They struck out west. Three days later, they appeared again, this time from the east. They were just as surprised as everyone else. No, they said, they hadn't gotten turned around and gone in a circle. After all, how hard was it to keep the sun in your face in the morning and at your back in the afternoon? They kept insisting that they had always continued west. So how did they wind up returning from the east?

The answer was very simple, if one assumed that this "planet" had a diameter of around thirty kilometers. Of course, with such a tiny diameter the horizon should be almost within a stone's throw. But it looked perfectly normal. And how could such a tiny globe have Earth-normal gravity? So, either the three adventurers had really gotten mixed up and traveled in a circle, or else there were some mighty funny things going on with this world.

Either one was possible, Wilder insisted. For a truly advanced race, toying with geometry would probably be child's play. Magic, he said. Remember?

Well, Cherry thought to himself as he leaned against the tree, one thing's for sure. We won't find out any time soon. Whatever we're here for, whoever brought us here, they haven't bothered to communicate with us. So far, they haven't even put in an appearance. If it weren't for the fact that no other explanation was possible, it would be very easy to disbelieve in their very existence.

What did they want with the *Lola's* crew?

And more importantly, what was going to happen to them?

Is this some kind of experiment? If so, are we performing up to expectations? Maybe it's a zoo, and right now hundreds of little bug-eyed aliens with pointy ears are pointing tentacles at us and talking to each other in guttural croaks and bleeps...

He sighed and stood up. Well, he said silently, maybe I should give them something a bit more interesting than just watching me sit under a tree. Shaking his head at the absurdity of the thought, he started down a nearby trail, hoping to get a bit of exercise.

4

"Hey, Captain, wait up!"

Cherry halted and turned. He was about thirty meters along one of his favorite hiking trails in what he had recently christened "Olympia Junior." Behind him, running to catch up, he saw Lisa Miller. He waited.

"What's up, Lisa?" he asked mildly when she reached him.

She didn't answer at first, just stood hunched over, hands on knees, panting to catch her breath. Out of shape, Cherry thought sadly. Just like the rest of us. Although he, himself, was getting a bit better; he had been getting in some regular hiking for the past three or four weeks, ever since that day when he sat under the tree contemplating his navel.

"I need to talk to you," she finally said, straightening up.

"Sure," he replied. "No problem. I don't think either of us is going anywhere. Why?" he added with a slight grin. "You and Harry want me to perform a little ceremony for you two?"

She blushed, started to smile, then stopped. Her expression grew serious. "No, sir. Although that very subject is probably what got me started thinking about what I really want to talk about."

Cherry paused a moment, then motioned with his head. "Come on," he said. "I know a little place up here where we can sit and talk."

They started off down the trail. Cherry knew that something was bothering her; these days, nobody called him "sir" anymore unless they were serious. They walked in silence.

About a half-kilometer along the trail they came to a little clearing. Logs had been arranged around the edge, just perfect for sitting on. Cherry sometimes wondered about how their alien hosts had come to put them there. He went over and sat down, then indicated another log for Lisa.

"Okay," he said, "what's up?"

Lisa looked at the ground for a moment, as if unsure of where to begin. Finally, she looked up. "Sir," she began, "are you happy here?"

Captain Cherry's eyes widened slightly. He hadn't anticipated this subject. Then he realized that there was more in her question than his personal happiness. Much more.

"I'm content," he said, carefully. "Why?"

She looked hard at him for a moment, then relaxed her gaze. "No offense, Captain, but no matter how nice it is, it's still a prison. Wouldn't you rather be back on the ship? What about your family back on Earth?"

He sighed. "What can I say?" he replied. "There's not much I can do about it. So why not just accept it?" He spread his hands. "Like you said, it's nice."

"Not everyone feels that way," Lisa said.

He looked at her quizzically. "Like you?"

She shrugged and shook her head in exasperation. "I don't know," she said. "Maybe. No, it's not bad. You're right. It is nice." Now she looked intensely into his eyes. "But what are you living for?"

"Lisa—" he started to say. She overrode him.

"Look," she said emphatically, "we're all just sitting around, eating like pigs, getting fat, dumb and happy. All for what? It's like we're animals in some kind of zoo!"

"We've already discussed this," Cherry said patiently. "Zoo. Laboratory. Prison. What does it matter? We're here and we can't do a thing about it."

"I'm not a dumb animal!" she insisted violently. "Neither is Harry." She paused. "That's part of our problem. Part of me wants to marry Harry. But he's scared. Says he doesn't want to have kids here for some bug-eyed zookeeper to play with." She chuckled softly without humor. "I guess people just don't

breed well in captivity."

Cherry shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I guess I've never been a zoo animal before."

Lisa stood up and paced back and forth. "Look, Captain, I don't know about you, but I'd like to do something about our situation, if I could."

"Like what?"

"Like try to get out of here, for starters. What do you think of that?"

He sighed. "Well, to be honest, if I knew how, I'd be glad to join you. But I don't even know where to begin. These 'bug-eyed zookeepers' of yours seem to have covered all the bases."

Lisa stopped and stood facing him. "They're not perfect," she insisted stubbornly. "They make mistakes."

"How do you know?"

"I'm a biologist, remember? I notice things."

"Such as?"

"Such as little 'mistakes', you could call them, in this environment. No, I don't mean putting the Arizona desert next to this Washington rainforest. I mean in little things, details. For instance, have you noticed the bugs?"

He nodded. "Of course. They included bugs."

"Well, they didn't get them exactly right."

"If they got them from reading our minds—"

Lisa overrode him. "They got them from images in our minds. Sure, they can look into our brains and extract just about whatever they want, but they don't necessarily know what to do with it." She paused. "For example, they got the sizes wrong on a number of bugs."

"Is that all?"

"Yes!" she shot back. "And you could tell because they corrected things later. There was this species of beetle in the Midwest section. I'm guessing our 'hosts' got it from some image in someone's mind out of a book or something. They didn't have anything to compare it with, so they got it too big. I noticed it almost right away. Then, a few days later, the beetles were normal sized."

"That means they're still reading our minds," Cherry pointed out. "Wouldn't that make it even harder to get out of here?"

"They can look into our minds," she explained, "but they can't really read them."

"What makes you think that?" the captain demanded.

Lisa spread her hands. "Have they ever tried to communicate with us?" Seeing Cherry's expression she drove on. "No. They haven't. You know why? They can't."

"Why not?"

She smacked her fist into her palm. "They can't understand our language," she stated. "They can probably read the sounds, but it doesn't make any sense to them. Maybe they don't even use speech themselves. Maybe they're telepaths. Maybe something completely different. But our language simply doesn't make sense to them. We can talk all we want and they won't understand a thing."

Cherry paused thoughtfully. "So you think we should start discussing ways to get out of here?"

Lisa nodded.

"Look," he finally said, "like I said, I've got no problem with that. If you or anyone else can come up with something you think might work, I'll be glad to hear it." He continued, overriding her protest. "But you need to remember a few things."

"Such as?"

"Such as, where's the ship? Where are we? How do we get off this rock or whatever? Those are just for starters. We don't have any equipment. And I don't think they'll let us dismantle any of the stuff they provided, even if we could understand it." Seeing the expression on her face, he stopped. "Look, I'm sorry—" he began after a moment. She interrupted him.

"Captain, you're not listening!" she practically screamed. "I'm trying to tell you that I need to at least try, just to keep from going insane, and you're not listening! You've got all the logical answers. Well, I don't care about logical answers!" The next moment she was sobbing.

Cherry opened his mouth to respond, then stopped. He had been thinking about the comprehension gulf between humans and their alien captors. Now, he found himself wondering about the gulf that existed simply between men and women. How could he hope to understand the former if he couldn't understand the latter?

To that he had no answer.

5

It was two weeks after Cherry's discussion with Lisa Miller that the first sighting took place. Ironically, it was Lisa and her beau, Harry Jacobs, who saw it. The first inkling that the captain had that anything unusual had taken place was when he was returning from one of his interminable walks in the forest, and discovered an animated crowd gathered on the basketball court. Curious, he went over to find out what was going on.

As he approached, Padre Don spotted him and waved him over. "Hey, Captain!" he hollered. "Did you hear the news?"

Cherry shook his head as he arrived. A part of his mind was pleased; a month ago he would have been out of breath. The regular exercise was paying off. "What news?" he demanded.

Several people started talking at once. It took several minutes, but Cherry was finally able to piece together that Lisa and Harry had been out for a walk in the east field, watching deer ("You wouldn't want to eat one," she had once mentioned. "They may look like deer, and they may act like deer, but eating one would be one of the more unpleasant ways of killing yourself."). They were just turning to leave when Harry spotted a silvery bubble floating about three meters off the ground, about a stone's throw away. They froze. The bubble stayed still, unmoving, for nearly a minute, then simply vanished.

There had been something inside the bubble. What it was, they were never able to clearly describe. It wasn't that it was indistinct, but rather, that human vocabulary did not possess the necessary words. It was watching them, that much they were sure of. What it used for sensory organs neither one of them had the slightest idea, or even what kind of senses it had, for that matter. Afterward, Lisa commented that the sight of the creature had redefined the term "alien" for her.

"Maybe our 'hosts' are finally condescending to visit us," Don Wilder put in dryly.

"A fat lot of good it did," Harry Jacobs growled. "Could have been a rock, for all I could tell."

"Maybe it was some kind of probe," one of the engineers put in.

Wilder shook his head. "I doubt it. I'm betting that bubble was some kind of environmental shield. Why hide a probe inside something like that?"

"Maybe they just didn't want us primitive animals smashing it," Lisa added in a sarcastic tone.

"That's what you use a probe for," Wilder said. "You expect to lose a few, but nobody gets hurt."

"What makes you think they think like us?" Harry wanted to know.

Wilder shrugged. "I don't. Anyway, I'm sure they've been watching us with instruments and probes ever since they put us here. Why do something special like this unless one of them actually wanted to see us up close?"

"You've got a point," Captain Cherry admitted. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "In which case, maybe this is our chance to try and get their attention."

"Now you're talking!" Harry exclaimed. And for the first time in weeks Cherry saw an actual smile on Lisa's face. And on a lot of other faces as well.

"I don't know if they can understand our gestures," the captain began, "but it's as good a place as any to start—"

"Gestures?" Harry spat. "Is that all? I say we tackle the thing next time it shows up! Hold on to it and make them let us go!" A number of voices murmured agreement.

A part of Cherry wasn't surprised. Reflecting back upon his conversation with Lisa, he realized that perhaps it was inevitable. That didn't mean that he approved.

He didn't need to say anything. Before he could open his mouth, Don Wilder put his very thoughts into words. "And how do you propose to do that?" he asked quietly.

Harry appeared slightly taken aback. "I don't know," he said. "Jump on it? There're probably enough of

us. Threaten to pop its bubble if they don't let us go."

"Yeah!" one of the other crewmembers shouted in agreement. "They probably can't breathe our air. Make them choke on poison!" Once again, a babble of voices arose.

Cherry held up his hands. "Hold it. Hold it!" he shouted. Several faces turned toward him in resentment. "Hold it!" he shouted even louder. Finally, the babble died down.

"You really think you could puncture their protective sphere?" he asked. "With what?" One of the engineers started to say something, but saw the expression on Cherry's face. "Even if we had the ship we probably wouldn't have anything that could pierce whatever it is they've got."

"But we've got to try!" Harry Jacobs yelled in frustration. "What's the matter with you? You want to just stay here the rest of your life? Wander around in the woods like some dumb animal in a zoo? I sure don't!"

Cherry fixed him with a glare. "That's enough, mister," he snapped. "For your information, no, I don't want to spend the rest of my life in this..." he threw his hands up, "in this... cage. But we've got to wait until we've got a reasonable chance to succeed. If we start pouncing on their bubbles every time they show up they'll just watch us more closely. But if we act like a bunch of dumb cows, maybe they'll get careless and someday we'll get a real chance to get out of here."

Harry subsided, seething. Cherry watched him for a couple of seconds, then turned his gaze to include everyone. "Is that clear?" he demanded. "We don't do anything to antagonize them. We wait. Someday we'll get our chance."

There was some grumbling, but nobody spoke up. Cherry nodded, then turned and walked away.

He had won this round, but the game was far from over.

* * *

"Captain!"

Cherry looked up from his meal to see who was calling his name. The refectory was mostly empty; people came and went as they pleased, ordering whatever they wanted from the food replicators. He had been enjoying a large sundae with nuts and whipped cream and lots of hot fudge. Well, at least it looked and tasted like ice cream and hot fudge; Lisa Miller was pretty sure that it was really some kind of flavored nutrient mass. She'd gone on a binge a while back and pigged out on tortilla chips, Coke and chocolate cake for a couple of weeks, and hadn't gotten fat or developed zits or anything. And if all the food was like that, then they were in Food Heaven.

He recognized Nelson de Souza, a swarthy Brazilian botanist who had worked in Lisa's department. Cherry privately suspected that the presence of a portion of their environment resembling the Amazon rain forest was due to something drawn from de Souza's mind. It wasn't his favorite part of their little world; Cherry preferred cooler climes.

De Souza slowed to a trot as he approached the captain's table. "Captain!" he called again, slightly out of breath. "They're back."

"Hunh?"

"Them! The aliens or whatever!"

"Where?"

"Out at the basketball court!"

Cherry jumped up, his ice cream forgotten. De Souza was already halfway to the door. Cherry followed him at a dead run.

Outside, the small, white sun blazed nearly directly overhead. In spite of this, the temperature was shirtsleeve comfortable in this particular zone. The sports complex was on the other side of the quadrangle, near the dormitory. Even at this distance, Cherry could see the gathered crowd.

Above them hovered something round and shiny, like an errant moon.

Several faces turned as he arrived. He paid no attention to them. His gaze was fixed on the shiny bubble floating about three meters over the basketball court. The crowd stood at the edge, on the grass, as if the cement had suddenly become unholy ground. He stopped, panting slightly, and stared.

The bubble was about two and a half meters in diameter, and perfectly round. It was impossible to tell what it was composed of, but it was transparent, with a hint of sheen in the sunlight reflecting from its surface. But it was what was inside that held his shocked attention.

Standing there, gazing down benignly at the assembled crowd, was his mother.

"Mom?"

This was impossible.

His mother was back on Earth, still living in the family home out in Washington state. She and his father had come to Florida to see him off when the shuttle launched to take him and the rest of the crew up to the waiting starship. That was the last time he had seen her.

What was this?

"Excuse me?"

Cherry glanced aside to see Lisa Miller standing next to him, looking at him strangely. Her gaze flicked back to the bubble momentarily, then returned to him.

"Is that your mother?"

He could only nod slightly.

"That's impossible, Captain." Her voice was small and unsure.

Again, he could only nod slightly.

Don Wilder appeared on Lisa's other side. "They probably got her image out of your mind," he said,

softly.

Cherry finally found his voice. "I take it this isn't what you and Harry saw the last time," he said to Lisa.

She shook her head firmly. "No, sir. I still can't describe what it was we saw, but it definitely wasn't human."

Cherry forced his racing thoughts under control. He cleared his throat. "I don't think this is, either." He looked back at the figure.

Mom?

No way.

Absolutely, no way.

Resolutely, he stepped forward and raised his hands, spreading his arms. "Can you understand me?" he asked in as firm a voice as he could manage, looking the image of his mother directly in the eyes.

The figure paid no attention. Now Cherry peered more closely at the face. No, this definitely was not his mother. It may look like her, but he had never seen an expression like that on either of his parents' faces. He doubted if they were even capable of it.

He recalled Lisa's statement that the aliens couldn't understand human language. Gestures, he reminded himself. We've got to try and communicate by gestures. But where to begin?

Were even gestures universal enough to be understood? Was anything?

For all he knew, a knife thrust into their equivalent of a gut was an act of sexual delight.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Harry Jacobs bending down. He ignored him. Pointing to himself he said, "James Cherry." He pointed at the Padre and said, "Donald Wilder."

The blank, almost beatific expression never left the alien face.

Suddenly he heard Harry Jacobs shout. "This is all a bunch of crap! They can't hear us and they don't care!" Cherry glanced at him. He was holding a jagged, fist-sized rock in his right hand. "Don't you get it? They're just playing with us! Like you play with your dog! Here, Rover! Fetch! Well, this dog has had it!"

With that, he hurled the stone at the bubble with all of his strength.

The blank, almost beatific expression never left the alien face.

Cherry saw the rock strike the bubble. Then he saw it disappear. It was as if it passed through an invisible barrier into nothingness.

Harry snarled and reached for another rock. Cherry started toward him. "No!" he shouted. A half-dozen pairs of hands seized him, just as Harry hurled another rock.

Then rocks were flying from all over. Cherry was flung to the ground as the hands that had seized him now reached for missiles to throw instead. Dazed, the captain lay on the ground, watching as a veritable cloud of projectiles struck the surface of the bubble and vanished. People were yelling and screaming, crying and cursing. The hatred in the air was almost palpable.

The blank, almost beatific expression never left the alien face.

The creature never even turned its gaze. It was as if it were observing the scene with other senses, using the image of Cherry's mother simply as a façade. Which, perhaps, it was. Maybe it wasn't even real. Maybe it was just a projection of some kind.

Maybe he was already insane, lying in a dreaming state somewhere, imagining all of this.

All at once, the bubble vanished. Several missiles found themselves without a target and simply continued on their trajectories, arcing down to land on the cement court with a clatter.

Cherry scrambled to his feet. He glared around at the crowd still standing, many with rocks still clenched in their fists. A number of faces dropped in shame, but at least a few glared back.

"Just what did that accomplish?" the captain demanded. "Tell me."

One of the hostile faces was Harry Jacobs'. "It got their attention," he grated.

"Yeah," Cherry shot back. "Like a mad dog."

"So?"

"So what do you do with a mad dog?" He shifted his gaze again, letting it drift across the assembled faced. "Usually, you shoot it," was his final comment.

6

"It's getting bad."

Don Wilder nodded slowly. He and Captain Cherry were sitting in a corner of the refectory. A couple of other people were sitting on the other side, eating. Everyone else was out.

"I mean, dissatisfaction and resentment, I can understand," the captain went on. "But I'll swear Harry Jacobs is ready to mutiny."

Wilder looked thoughtful. "Mind if I make a couple of observations?" he asked.

"Go ahead. I could use all the advice I can get." Cherry wore a wry smile.

"You're military, aren't you?" Wilder asked. Cherry nodded. "Real military. You've fought in a war."

"Yeah," Cherry agreed grimly. "The Muslim conflict five years ago. It wasn't fun."

The Padre sat up straight and fixed Cherry with a look. "Okay, that's my first observation. There's a part of you that doesn't want to go back to that kind of thing. So that part of you is perfectly content to spend the rest of your life in this place, walking your trails and eating ice cream that isn't bad for you."

"Now, wait a minute. I want to get out of here as much as the next guy."

Wilder tilted his head. "Are you sure? Are you sure that isn't just duty talking? Stop thinking like a military man for a moment and ask your inner self what you really want."

For a moment, Cherry didn't answer. Then he dropped his gaze. "Maybe you've got something," he admitted. "But it's only a small part. The part of me that really counts wants out. I mean, if I don't want to go dodge rag-head bullets, I can just retire when we get home, right?" He paused reflectively. "After this, I don't think the top brass will have any objections if I want to spend the rest of my life just vegetating."

Wilder shrugged. "You can vegetate all you want right here. See my point?"

Cherry nodded glumly. "Okay, you've made your point. What else?"

Wilder jerked his head toward the other two crewmembers on the other side of the room. "You're military," he said. "Are they?"

"Well, yes," the captain said, puzzled. "Why?"

"Are they real military? Did they ever fight in a war or do anything else that real soldiers do? Or did they just join for the formality so that they could explore space?"

Cherry pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Probably the latter," he admitted.

Wilder went on. "So here you are," he said. "You have real military experience. You know what to do in a bad situation. At least, you understand discipline and basic tactics." His head jerked toward the others again. "They don't. And the civilian scientists certainly don't."

Cherry looked away for a moment, then back. "So, what you're saying is that they don't really understand what I'm talking about when I say we've got to wait for the right opportunity."

"Exactly. They're going with their feelings. They resent being here. And since they don't understand you, they think you're going along with our alien captors. Being a traitor, even. They're angry and want to strike out."

"I see," Cherry said slowly. "So now, not only are we trapped here, but I've managed to make enemies of my whole crew."

"No, not everyone. There are a few with some common sense who agree with you. But, yeah, a lot of them are probably pretty mad at you right now. I doubt if they'll take your orders much longer. We're no longer on the ship, and for those without a real military mindset, it doesn't take much to jump out from under the chain of command."

"Well, I'm not going to change my mind," Cherry insisted. "I still think that was pretty stupid, throwing rocks at that alien. Like I said, they'll probably watch us more closely now. Somehow I'm going to have to win them over." He snorted without mirth. "Any thoughts, since you seem to be so full of wisdom right now?"

Padre Don shook his head. "None that would work. The best thing you can do is work on the undecideds. Convince them you're right. You can't just order them around. Even though you and I both

know you've got the right, they won't accept it. What are you going to do if they don't obey? You're going to have to use reason. Talk to them one-on-one. Win them over."

"Will you help?"

Wilder nodded. "Of course." He smiled. "But the truth is, it's not because I really feel under the chain of command any more than the others. I just happen to think you're right."

* * *

"Captain Cherry!"

Cherry looked up from his reverie. As was usual these days in the middle of the afternoon, he was sitting in his favorite clearing, the one where he had had his conversation with Lisa Miller only a few weeks ago. Since the incident with the alien sphere his relationship with most of the rest of the crew had deteriorated even further. Three more times their mysterious keepers had appeared, each time in the guise of someone known to one or more of the people present. There hadn't been any more rock throwing incidents, but Cherry knew that it was only a matter of time before something exploded.

Two men were coming along the trail. As they entered the clearing he stared at them in surprise. Up until this point, everyone had worn casual clothing, either ordinary civilian attire or a ship uniform. Since the replicators made any kind of outfit anyone wanted, Cherry had seen some rather outlandish duds at times. But these two men were different.

They were wearing military uniforms. Furthermore, once Cherry got past the momentary surprise of seeing such clothing, he noticed something else.

They were carrying pistols.

He began to chuckle. "Okay, Pete," he said to the first one, "what's the game?"

Pete did not reply. Instead, his partner stopped on one side of Cherry while he proceeded to the other side. Then both men pulled their weapons from their holsters and pointed them in his general direction.

Cherry lifted his hands good-naturedly. "Okay," he said with a smile. "You got me. What am I supposed to do now?"

Neither of the men smiled. Instead, Pete barked, "You're under arrest."

Okay, the captain thought, I'll play along. "On what charge?" he asked.

"Treason to the human race."

This was going a bit too far. He remembered some of the things Don Wilder had said. "Let's cut the crap," he said. "This has gone far enough."

Pete brought his pistol up and aimed it at the captain's head. "You are under arrest for treason," he said sternly. "Now get up!"

Cherry sat quietly for a moment. "And if I don't?" he demanded softly. "What are you going to do with those toys?"

For an answer, Pete shifted his aim and pulled the trigger. A loud report shattered the silence, and Cherry heard a bullet whiz past his ear and thunk into a tree. He jerked violently.

"What the..." he spluttered as Pete brought the gun back to bear on his face. "Where the devil did you get that thing?" Everyone knew that the replicators would not produce weapons.

"That is none of your concern," came the reply. "You are under arrest."

Cherry rose to his feet. "All right," he snarled. "I'll come with you. But," he leveled a finger at Pete, "when I find out what's going on I'll have you busted right out of the service."

The other man, an engineer named Stan, laughed outright. "We're not part of your precious 'service' any more."

"So in other words, you're a couple of mutineers." He started down the trail, the two soldiers right behind him.

"By no means," Pete replied mockingly. "We fully recognize the authority of the President."

"What 'President'?"

"President Harold Isaac Jacobs, who else?"

They marched on in silence.

* * *

"So they got you, too, hunh?"

Cherry nodded glumly at the Padre as the door clanged shut behind him. They were in a cell. It was not part of the original architectural design of the complex any more than the weapons.

"What'd they pick you up for?" Cherry asked in response.

"Probably the same thing as you," Wilder replied. "'Treason to the human race.' So now we're here while they sit out there, seeking new ways to make our captors angry."

"You said it," Cherry spat. "We'll be lucky if they don't kill us all after this." He paused. "Where the devil did they get those guns? And what about this?" His hands indicated the prison around them.

Wilder sighed. "I'm afraid it's more bad news. It seems our friend Harry has been playing with the replicator programming."

"Hunh? How the deuce could he figure anything out? It's probably so advanced I don't see how he could make heads or tails out of it."

"I don't know either, but it looks like he managed to take the interlocks off. It will produce anything he wants now."

"Including guns."

Wilder nodded. "Including guns."

"So now what's he going to do? Start taking pot shots at alien bubbles?"

Padre Don seemed to consider that for a moment. "Actually, I don't think so. You see, even though he says he doesn't agree with you, I think a part of him does. He seems to have calmed down. I think he's thinking things through more. Don't get me wrong, I still think he's reckless and dangerous. But I think you got through to him at least a bit."

Cherry nodded. "Good," he finally said. Then he looked straight at Wilder. "Now all we've got to do is deal with this business of him declaring himself the next Attila the Hun," he added in a growl.

They sat in silence for several minutes. Outside, there seemed to be some shouting going on. It died away. Then several more minutes later there came a soft knock at the door.

"Captain! Captain Cherry! Are you in there?"

Cherry was instantly on his feet and over by the entrance. "Yes, I'm here!" he said. "Don Wilder is in here with me."

Muffled talking sounds came through the door, then a few seconds later Cherry heard the original voice again. "Captain! Stand back from the door! Don't stand in line with it!"

He looked over at Wilder inquisitively. Wilder shrugged, then motioned for the captain to step away from the door. Hastily, he did.

He was just in time. A blinding flash exploded through the locked door, sending shards of hot and molten metal flying across the room. Cherry stumbled backward, his hands flying up to protect his face. "What the...!" he yelled.

The door swung open, the lock and handle blasted away. Two men and a woman ran in. The first man through was carrying a weird shaped device, something like a cross between a Tommy gun and a blast rifle out of a science fiction movie. He grinned.

"Sorry, Captain. It was the best way."

Cherry recognized him. It was Rod Orland, a squat, muscular black computer technician. Back on board the *Lola*, he had been in charge of the ship's automated systems. He grinned, white teeth showing.

"I take it you're not part of—"

"Harry's Revolt? No way, Captain. That's not the way I was brought up. My pappy would kill me."

Cherry indicated the thing Rod was carrying. "So what's that... whatever it is?"

He hefted it. "Oh, this? Just something I dreamed up."

"And the replicator made it for you."

"That's right. Of course, I had to wait 'til nobody was watching so I could use one of them Harry'd

already gimmicked up."

"Oh?" The captain's eyebrows lifted. "So not all the replicators have been changed?"

Rod shook his head. "Unh-unh. I guess Harry didn't want just anybody able to make anything they wanted. So he jimmed about a half-dozen over in the main complex."

"And you just walked in and made yourself a ray gun?"

"Well," Rod admitted, "it wasn't that easy. They don't know I'm still with you, but I think Harry's suspicious. I know Lisa is. They let me in, but they were watching. I had to wait until I had a chance. I said I was going to the can."

Cherry thought for a moment. "Look, Rod, I'd love to discuss this further. But right now I think we need to just get out of here."

"I'm with you, Boss," Rod replied. "So is everyone here." The other two nodded. "Where do you want to go?"

"I've been thinking," Cherry said slowly. "If we run off to the rainforest, that's the first place they'll look."

Rod nodded. "I was thinking that. So we go somewhere else."

"Exactly. But first, we go to the rainforest," Cherry added with a smile.

"Why?" Rod wanted to know.

"Because that's where they think we'd go."

"Ah! And then..."

"And then we go somewhere else. I'd suggest north. The rainforest turns into something more eastern, like Connecticut, and after that mountains."

"Mountains!"

"Yeah. Not really big ones; after all, this isn't a really big world. But big enough. Anyone trying to find us would have a dickens of a time."

"And after that?" Wilder interjected.

Cherry sighed. "We'll think about 'after that' later."

7

"Well I'll be..." Rod Orland breathed. "Real mountains..."

Cherry grinned. "Like 'em?"

"This boy was born and raised in Denver, Colorado. You bet I like 'em." He paused a moment. "No

way..." he said slowly. "No way..."

"What?"

Rod pointed. "That's Pike's Peak," he said, indicating a prominent snow-capped spire. "Now I wonder where they got that..."

"Looks like they picked your brain, too," Cherry drawled sarcastically. "Ain't you been here, yet?"

Rod shook his head. "I guess I never got around much. Too busy playing basketball back at the compound." He was a sports fanatic.

It was the second day since the party of five had broken out of Harry's impromptu holding cell. They hadn't met any opposition until they were nearly at the edge of the rainforest. It was at that point that three crewmembers loyal to the Revolt came running after them, waving pistols and shouting for them to stop. Rod hadn't hesitated. He had swung his newfangled weapon around and fired a blast over their heads.

It had been a frightening experience. Cherry had never seen the weapon in operation, and nearly yelled when he saw the tremendous, thick beam of raw energy erupt from the muzzle, accompanied by a buzzing roar like a combination of an angry lion and a chain saw. The three pursuers had dropped and cowered in terror. In the confusion that followed, Cherry and his group got away.

Later on, when he asked about the ray gun, Rod had simply shrugged and said, "I saw it on a cheap space flick a few years ago. I guess the replicator just knew what I wanted and made it."

The replicator. The more Cherry thought about it, the more uneasy he felt. Making guns was one thing. Even making Rod's blast rifle, though a bit frightening, nevertheless fit into his previous experience.

The holding cell didn't.

If Harry had brewed up the holding cell using the replicators, that meant that they were no longer restricted to materializing objects in their chambers. Making a building was a significant step closer to altering the environment itself.

Could Harry order a section, such as the rainforest, to simply vanish?

And why were their alien captors allowing this in the first place?

When they stopped the first night, Cherry had put the question to Don Wilder. The Padre had thought about it for a moment before replying.

"It may simply be part of the experiment," he said.

"Meaning?" Cherry prompted.

"Meaning they will probably allow us to do just about anything we want short of actually destroying this environment. Most likely there are limits to what we can do. For example, I doubt that we could build or alter anything that would allow us to escape. And we still probably can't hurt their bubbles."

"You think they'll keep watching us?"

Wilder nodded. "Of course. Probably now more than ever. They may be using unobtrusive methods now instead of the bubbles." He glanced upward. "I wouldn't be surprised if they're watching us right now, recording every word we say."

"But they don't understand us," Cherry insisted. "Why record our speech?"

Wilder chuckled softly. "They're probably recording things we wouldn't even think of. Thoughts. Emotions. Skin color changes. Maybe things we have no idea even exist. The sounds we make are just one more item."

Cherry had let the subject drop and soon drifted off to sleep. When he awoke the next morning, he discovered that their party of five had increased to seven. To his surprise, one of the newcomers was Lisa Miller.

"He's out of control," she had said in explanation when he asked her what had prompted her to leave Harry and join them. "He's no longer satisfied to be President Harry. Now he's King Harry and expects the rest of us to call him 'Your Highness'. Even me! He doesn't care about me any more," she added bitterly. "He doesn't even care that much about getting out of here. All he cares about is power. He's still tinkering with the replicators. I don't know what he's trying to do, but I decided I'd better get out before I found out the hard way."

And now the party of seven was beyond the rainforest and into the plains, with the mountains plainly visible on the horizon. Rod Orland was grinning and merrily leading the way to the alien replica of Pike's Peak. Like a kid on vacation, Cherry thought. I guess he's reacting to the mountains the way I reacted to the rainforest.

For all of their inability to understand us, he mused, these aliens sure managed to create an environment to keep us content. If, of course, humans could be content to just be zoo animals. Harry was right, he realized. Maybe I had just given up and become a contented cow. Or maybe a happy dog with the right bone to chew. But what else could we do?

Some humans just don't domesticate well.

Maybe I'm one who does.

By the time night fell, they were camped out in the foothills of the mountains.

* * *

Cherry sat up suddenly.

Around him, it was dark. Overhead, stars glittered against the eternal black background. The two points of steady light that represented the giant planet and its huge moon hovered just above the western horizon.

The air was chilly, and Cherry felt it. They had only had time to grab one blanket each, plus a small amount of food, before running. In the back of his mind, he wondered what they were going to do when the food ran out. The plants were definitely not edible. Although they resembled terrestrial flora, their internal and cellular structures were totally alien. Lisa had commented once that a human's first involuntary reaction would probably be to vomit it up, along with everything else consumed within the

past several hours, and if he failed to get it up and out immediately it would probably kill him in less than a minute. Very unpleasantly.

He reached for his blanket and pulled it around him. Next to him, Don Wilder stirred, rolled slightly, then opened his eyes. Seeing Cherry awake he levered himself into a sitting position next to him.

"What's up?" he asked softly.

"Nothing," Cherry replied in an equally low voice. "I just woke up."

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, listening to the soft snores and other sleeping sounds around them. Cherry chuckled slightly as he noted that Lisa Miller purred like a kitten in her repose. He wondered what Harry must have thought. His smile vanished when he thought back to his conversation with her only a few weeks ago. Instead of performing the Captain's Ceremony of Holy Matrimony, he was helping her to escape from her would-be-groom, probably to save her life. "I'm sorry, Lisa," he murmured quietly. She did not stir.

"What was that?" Wilder asked.

"Oh, nothing," Cherry answered. "I was just thinking about Lisa and Harry. It's too bad what's happened with him."

"I think it's frightening," Wilder said quietly.

"Why do you think that?" Cherry wanted to know.

The Padre turned toward him. "Human nature," he said. "Power. Corruption."

"You mean like 'Power corrupts', and all that?"

A nod. "And absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"Yeah."

Wilder continued. "There's something in each one of us," he said. "I call it 'sin nature'." He smiled faintly. "You probably call it something else. The primal brain. Leftover instincts. Whatever. It doesn't matter. What matters is that it's there. Human beings are selfish. It's why communism didn't work. When you put human beings in paradise you don't get better human beings. You get ruined paradise. It's the same here."

He paused for a moment. "Before, it wasn't too bad. Guys like Harry Jacobs could complain and reject authority and form their own community and it didn't mean a thing, because we didn't have the means to really do anything. Now that's changed. Harry is unleashing something that will kill us all."

"Unless we submit to him," Cherry murmured grimly.

Wilder shook his head sadly. "Will you submit to him? I didn't think so. Otherwise you wouldn't be here, running away." He sighed. "What happens when someone else back there decides that he or she wants to be Number One and starts recruiting? What happens is that each side makes bigger and better guns, then bombs and who knows what else until they've managed to kill each other off completely."

"Or if someone starts changing the environment, such as turning the atmosphere into chlorine and sulfuric acid, for example," Cherry noted sourly.

"I see you've thought of that as well."

"Maybe we should go back," Cherry said thoughtfully. "See if we can put a stop to it."

"How?"

It was Cherry's turn to sigh. "Yeah, you're right. It'd just be the same thing." He turned to look at Wilder. "You tell me. Are we really more than just animals? I mean, here we are with the toys the big boys use, and what are we doing? Playing King of the Hill like two dogs in a pack."

"We don't have to fight if we don't want to."

"Sure we do. You said it. We're selfish. Maybe I'd be willing to submit to Harry for the general good, but not everyone will. Somebody else will start pounding on his chest like King Kong and next thing you know it'll all blow up."

"You're probably right," the Padre agreed, once again staring out over the plain. "But tell me, does that make us animals or does it make us human?"

"But civilized people don't—"

"Ah!" Wilder interrupted. "'Civilized' people. Are we truly civilized?"

"Of course!" Cherry snapped.

"Why?"

"Because...because if we weren't we'd all kill each other and everything would break down..." Cherry's voice trailed off.

"Like here."

"Yeah, like here." Cherry paused. "Maybe you're right. Maybe we're really not civilized."

"Oh, we are," Wilder replied. "It's a legacy handed down from generation to generation ever since the beginning. We're civilized because our parents were. They are civilized because their parents were. Even new nations. The United States developed a civilized, democratic government because the colonists all came from nations with civilized governments."

"But what about us here?" Cherry demanded. "We all come from nations with 'civilized governments'. What's the matter with us?"

He was about to speak again when Wilder finally replied. "I think that the problem is that there has been too much of a discontinuity. We were thrown into this against our will. We didn't come here intending to form a colony. We are captives of a more advanced race. And now we've gotten our hands on technology literally so far advanced so as to seem like magic. It's been too much. And now our true nature is coming out."

Cherry clasped his hands together and rested his chin on his knuckles, peering out across the plain, across the rainforest, to the invisible compound where his fellow humans were busy throwing off the veneer of civilization. "And how much do you think it's going to 'come out'?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," Wilder replied. "But I'm afraid we're going to find out."

* * *

Morning light found Cherry bundled up in his blanket, shivering. The air was cold. He opened his eyes, squinting against the tiny but brilliant white sun that provided light for this strange world. Then he sat up suddenly.

The sun hung on the horizon, an actinic ball of incandescence risen a couple of degrees into the sky, just like every other morning since he had first awakened and found himself here. But it wasn't the sun that had grabbed his attention.

He gazed south, past the foothills and plains to the rainforest and hidden complex. It was all invisible. A heavy blanket of fog hung over everything, a cottony white sea glistening in the dawn. Below, the lower slopes of the mountains rose out of the bank like a reef.

In all their days of imprisonment, there had never been fog.

A couple of meters away Lisa Miller stirred, then opened her eyes. A few moments later, she was looking alternately between the white sea below and the captain. Her face bore more apprehension, then puzzlement.

Fifteen minutes later, everyone was awake. Cherry stood off to one side with Don Wilder. "So what do you think?" he asked quietly. "Any words of wisdom? Is this something Harry's doing, or is it our hosts, trying to send a message?"

Wilder rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I doubt if it's our 'hosts'," he finally answered. "It just doesn't have the right 'feel'."

"So you think Harry's playing with the weather, hunh?"

"Yeah. I think the aliens would probably do something more subtle and effective. This is just show. Getting back to the zoo analogy," he added after a moment's pause, "it's like a dog urinating on a tree."

Cherry smiled inwardly for a moment, recalling how the family mutt used to mark trees and bushes back when he was a teenager. Harry, he thought sadly, are you just a dog?

And what does that make us?

He turned and made his way back to the group.

A half-hour later, they were trudging along, working their way up into the higher elevations. It was Cherry's idea to find a comfortable location, such as a valley, and set up camp. Beyond that he hadn't really thought things out. Probably someone would have to make their way back to the compound and use the replicators, he realized. Procure some food. And maybe order some fast-growing seeds as well. Maybe the native growth was highly poisonous, but so far the replicators hadn't failed to provide something palatable. Maybe they could also provide the means to grow their own real food.

Of course, he was probably just fooling himself, he also realized upon further reflection. Maybe they could manage to sneak out some food and seeds, and maybe some other necessities. But sooner or later Harry would come looking for them. And by the time he did, only Heaven itself knew what kinds of horrific weapons and other instruments he would have. No, they wouldn't be able to hide long. Not if Harry was serious.

But Cherry couldn't just give up.

I'm a slow plodder, he decided with a sense of satisfaction at having finally figured himself out. When Harry and the others were frothing at the mouth to find a way out, I was content to wait. I never gave up hope, but like the tortoise, I was willing to wait and do it right. I would not allow myself to be pushed around by others' wishes. And it's the same now. I'm just as stubborn as I was back then. I won't let Harry and his rebels push me around. And I won't give up.

They were just rounding a corner into a small tree-lined canyon when something made Cherry turn around and look back. When he did, he stopped, his heart lurching up into his throat.

The fog was gone. Instead, a brilliant, flickering carpet of flashing lights and colors stretched across the land. Off in the distance it rose, until it reached the sky in a titanic spout of weird, alien energy.

The spout was right over the place where the compound stood.

As he watched, a whirlpool developed suddenly off to one side, like the drainage pattern in a bathtub. It spun for several seconds, then dissipated.

"Our show-off is expanding his range of talents," murmured Wilder's voice in his ear.

Cherry turned toward him. "You're still sure it isn't the aliens?"

Wilder shook his head. "They would not require such a display."

"But just what the devil does he think he's doing?"

A shrug. "Who knows?"

The two men turned away and started up the canyon. One by one, the others followed. After a few minutes, Cherry turned to the Padre.

"Why are you still coming with us?" he blurted out.

"Excuse me?"

"Why are you still here? I know what you think of all this. Why are you still fighting it? You talk like it's all useless, like we're going to end up blowing ourselves to bits or something. Is it some kind of game to you?"

Wilder smiled. "No, it's not a game. I guess I just don't see this life as being all there is. I believe in a better one to come. So why be anxious and disturbed about this one?"

"Well, some of us don't believe in any 'afterlife'. You know that. What you're talking about sounds like some kind of cosmic spectator sport. Watch the game, then when it's all over, drive away."

Wilder regarded Cherry mildly. "Would it help if I screamed and yelled and swore?"

Cherry's shoulders slumped. "No, not really. Look, I'm sorry. You've been pretty calm about all this. I really should be thanking you."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like I can count on you. You're...you're steady. Stable. I know you're not going to go off half-cocked like Harry and make yourself King Donald the First, Lord of the Northern Domains."

Wilder nodded thoughtfully. "Thanks." A moment later he added, "Of course, I'm not even sure that this is 'north'."

"Hunh? What do you mean? The sun rises in the east and we've been heading north."

"True," Wilder said patiently. "But remember how small this world is? Nate and his friends took only three days to go completely around it. As far 'north' as we've been traveling, the sun's path through the sky should be practically on the horizon, like in the far north on Earth. But it hasn't changed a bit."

"Yeah," Cherry grumbled. "More crazy geometry..."

"With what we've seen of the alien technology, anything is possible," Wilder said by way of agreement.

Cherry snorted. "Magic. I know." He spread his hands, indicating the upper end of the canyon. "Next thing you know we'll be able to say 'I want a castle!' and behold, it will appear out of thin air." He ended with a sarcastic flourish.

The next instant, he stumbled to a shocked halt.

For directly in front of him, nestled against the rear wall of the canyon, a castle had just appeared out of thin air.

* * *

"I would say that Harry has probably managed to completely disengage the interlocks on the replicators," Don Wilder said.

They were inside the castle, in the entrance hall. Like something out of a medieval dream, suits of armor stood arrayed along the walls. A grand, curving stairway led up and out of sight. In order to get inside they had had to cross a drawbridge over a real, honest-to-goodness moat.

With real, honest-to-goodness alligators.

Cherry stopped pacing. "So what are you saying?" he demanded. "All we've got to do now is imagine what we want and demand it and presto! There it is?"

Wilder nodded. "There are probably limits, but yes, that's basically what I'm saying."

"Great!" Cherry snapped. "So now what?" He held out a hand and closed his eyes momentarily. The next second a sausage and mushroom pizza in a deep-dish pan appeared. He opened his eyes and shook his head momentarily as if disoriented, then stared at what was in his hand. Slowly, he reached out his

other hand, picked up a piece, and bit into it. "You know," he mumbled between munching, "I could get to like this."

The next second, he hurled the entire pizza against the nearest wall with a clatter and whirled around. "No!" he yelled, spitting cheese, sauce and toppings. "I don't want to get used to it. This scares the devil out of me." Again, he closed his eyes.

Lisa Miller shrieked momentarily as her uniform-style clothes vanished, to be replaced by a bikini. She stared openmouthed at the captain.

Cherry opened his eyes again, then held his arms out, palms upward. "Where do I stop?" he asked in a helpless tone of voice. "You said it, Padre. Power corrupts." He chuckled mirthlessly. "I could do anything I want to any one of you."

Lisa fixed him with a glare. "Oh, yeah?" An instant later, the captain stood before them completely naked.

He glanced down in momentary surprise at his bare body, then back up at Lisa. "Very good," he said in an approving tone. "Very good. You catch on quickly." He grinned and snapped his fingers, and both he and Lisa were once again clothed in their usual attire. Then, his grin vanished, to be replaced by a serious expression.

"I think you see the problem," he said. "As our good Padre Don has pointed out, this probably means that Harry has managed to completely gimmick the replicator system. Now anyone, anywhere can order whatever they want. Just like magic, courtesy of our alien hosts. But like the Padre would also say, are we ready to be trusted with this kind of power?"

Rod Orland looked thoughtfully at Cherry. "You know, we lived with the atom bomb for how many years now? Never did end up blowing ourselves to bits like all them doomsday freaks kept saying."

"Yeah," Cherry replied. "But that was different. You needed a lot of technical know-how to make an atom bomb and deliver it. This is different."

Lisa grinned. "You said it!" she said gleefully. "'Power to the People' and all that!" She held out a hand and a bottle of wine appeared in it. She tipped her head back and took a swig. "Yeah, baby!"

Wilder folded his arms. "So is that what you want to do, Lisa?" he asked sadly. "Conjure up bottles of liquor and whatever else pleases your senses?"

"Why not?" she answered saucily. "Have a drink, Padre!" she added with a giggle. Immediately, he was holding a bottle in his own hand.

He held it up, glanced at it briefly, then lowered it again with a shake of his head. "It's fun now," he said. "But what happens when what you want conflicts with, say, what Rod wants? Or what Captain Cherry wants? What then?"

She was slightly nonplussed. "I suppose we work it out—" she began.

"Work it out how?" Cherry interjected. "Do we talk it out? Or do we slug it out with our new magic powers?"

"That is what makes this so dangerous," Wilder continued. "In the past there were limits to how much two people could hurt one another. But now... What if you just imagined my head were a cantaloupe and 'wished' it? You see what I mean?"

Lisa let her own hand drop, the bottle dangling loosely. "Yeah, I suppose I do. But what do you suggest? Someone's going to have to be in charge around here. How are we going to make that work if we can't all agree? I mean, what if the captain here wants to be king, but Rod doesn't like it? Do they see who can turn the other into a giant turnip and winner take all?"

"I suppose they could," Don agreed. "But it doesn't have to be that way." He cleared his throat. "I think this is the time we decide what we really are. Do we act like animals and claw and scratch one another until someone winds up on top? Or do we act like civilized human beings? Do we let the evil side of our nature control us, or do we control it instead?"

Nobody spoke. He went on. "Lisa, you've complained about the aliens keeping us caged up like animals. Well, maybe this is the chance you've been waiting for to prove otherwise. Maybe this is some kind of test. The question is, are we going to pass, and survive? Or are we going to fail and kill ourselves off?"

Lisa's voice was small. "I'm not an animal," she said, looking down. Then she looked back up. "But what about you? What about everyone else? Maybe I can decide to act civilized myself, but what if someone else doesn't? I mean, doesn't this depend on all of us?"

"You're right," Wilder agreed. "And back on Earth where nobody has this kind of power, the very thing you are describing happens from time to time. We call it 'criminal behavior'. Fortunately, society is usually strong enough to deal with it."

"Not always," Rod put in. "There's plenty of places back on Earth where it ain't safe to walk the street at night."

Wilder sighed. "That's true. And it only goes to prove my point about human nature. We all have that evil part within."

"So like I said," Lisa insisted, "what do we do?"

Wilder looked at her. "We do the only thing we can do. We talk. We all agree not to misuse these powers. We come to a consensus and agree to live by it."

"And if someone objects?"

"Then we hope that there is strength in numbers and that the majority truly rules."

Silence. After several seconds, Cherry nodded. "I'm game," he said. "I'll agree not to do anything. If we can come up with some rules I'll abide by them."

"Me, too," Lisa said quietly. The others indicated their agreement as well.

Wilder looked around in satisfaction. "Good," he said at last. "Now, let's talk."

"I like it."

Cherry turned to see Lisa Miller standing behind him to his left. She was gazing in approval at the new complex nestled in the space at the end of the canyon where the castle had once stood. Nearly a dozen buildings, all tastefully designed and well integrated, dotted the carefully landscaped compound, all resting securely behind a tall rampart that stretched from one side of the canyon to the other.

"It was a group decision," he reminded her. "You had just as much say as anyone else. Why should you be surprised?"

"I'm not," she answered. "It's just that, well, imagining it is one thing, but actually seeing it is another."

It was the third day since Cherry had unwittingly willed the castle into existence and therefore discovered the new powers that they all possessed. After the initial rocky moments, the group had settled into a fairly well organized social structure. Nobody really wanted chaos. As Don Wilder has privately admitted to Cherry the first evening, most human beings aren't motivated to obey laws because of any innate desire to do good. Rather, they fear the consequences of not obeying.

And the consequences of chaos in this situation could be very frightening indeed.

Cherry turned around to gaze down the valley. The huge doors in the outer wall were standing open; they could be shut in less than a second if necessary. Like so many things that they had called into existence, they did not understand the technology behind them. How anything so massive could be made to move that fast... He contented himself with the knowledge that the powers that designed the replicators understood.

Dangerous thinking, he said to himself in the next instant. If we keep thinking like that, in a few generations we'll be worshiping the aliens as if they were God Almighty.

That is, he added silently, if we even have any generations.

He dismissed that thought. It was too soon. Maybe in a few years, assuming that they managed to maintain a stable society, people might start thinking of reproduction...

Would they ever become that content?

What if Harry Jacobs was really right?

Moooo?

Well, whatever, he mused as he gazed down the valley, at least Harry has been quiet these days. After the initial fog and a few other demonstrations of environmental control—some rather spectacular, although none, fortunately, deadly—things appeared to have settled down back in the old compound.

Maybe Harry had come to the same conclusions as Cherry and his group.

"Maybe one of us should go have a look."

"Hunh?" Cherry turned back to Lisa. Had she been reading his mind?

"I know what you're thinking," she said, as if answering his unspoken question. "I guess we all kind of wonder what Harry's up to."

"He seems to have settled down," Cherry said. "Why go stir things up?"

She gave him an exasperated look. "Oh, come on!" she shot back. "Remember King Harry the First? What's next? The Lord Harry Almighty?"

"You don't have any evidence of that," he said patiently.

Lisa put her hands on her hips. "Look," she insisted, "we've got something pretty good here. Or haven't you noticed? You want to take a chance that the Lord God Harry might come waltzing in here some day and turn us all into toadstools?"

Cherry spread his hands. "No, I don't. All I'm saying is maybe we ought to give things a chance to die down a bit. We managed to come to our senses before we destroyed ourselves. Maybe Harry and his group can do the same."

"But we don't know that!" Lisa went on. "I'd just like to know what's going on down there, that's all."

"Okay," Cherry conceded. "You've got a point. But let's give it a little time. Besides, maybe we can think of some way of getting a look down there without risking our necks. Make some kind of a drone, maybe."

"Well..."

Cherry continued. "And unless we see something that scares us, maybe, just maybe, we might be able to talk to them. Just like we talked among ourselves."

"Well, but..."

"So what do we have to lose? Okay, we'd still probably end up living separately. Hell, I like this place better than the old compound, anyway. The truth is, I suspect that in the long run we'll all scatter, everyone carving out a place of their own. We just have to agree to let each other live in peace. Like we're doing here. Does all that make sense?"

Lisa nodded slowly. "I suppose..." She paused. "Yeah, okay." A smile. "Hey, I've got to go talk to the Padre," she added, changing the subject. "He wanted to talk about adding some animals here. Want a dog?" Without waiting for an answer she turned and headed down the path.

Cherry watched her as she went. Somehow, he didn't think that he had convinced her of a single thing.

* * *

"Hey Padre! Have you seen Lisa?"

Wilder turned and waited as Cherry trotted up to where he was working on a garden. A few dozen rows of vegetable plants were already sticking up out of the soil. Cherry recognized radishes, onions and carrots. He suspected that the ones off to the side were tomatoes.

"Not recently," Wilder replied to the captain's question. "Why?"

He grinned sheepishly. "She said something about adding some animals. I was wondering if she could make me a dog. It was her suggestion," he added with half-hearted defensiveness. "She said she was going to talk to you about it."

Wilder mused for a moment. "Well, she did come around a couple of days ago," he said. "She did say something about animals, now that you mention it." He grinned. "I was more interested in getting seeds."

"Seeds? We've got plenty of food. Plenty of plants, too."

"Yes, but these are real seeds."

"Real seeds?"

"Yes. Remember, she's a biologist. She knows enough about real seed structure and makeup to make something that will grow and actually nourish us, rather than kill us."

"So you planted a garden, hunh?"

He nodded. "Well, I got a little impatient and speeded things up a bit, but now that they're sprouting I think I'll just leave them alone. Except for using my hands, of course. It's more rewarding." He paused. "You know, being practically omnipotent can be fun, but it can also get a bit boring after a while. I don't think we were meant for this."

"Yeah, well tell that to Lisa," Cherry growled.

Wilder's smile vanished. "Has she been causing trouble?"

Cherry shook his head. "Oh, no. Not that. She's playing by the rules. But she does go off on her own and screw around with it. I'm afraid it's going to her head." He paused himself. "I'm also a bit worried about her attitude toward Harry. We talked about it the other day and she seemed to accept what I was saying, but afterward I kind of had some doubts."

"So what do you think she'll do?"

"I'm afraid she might decide to take matters into her own hands," Cherry said grimly. "Like I said earlier, I suspect Harry's now willing to let well enough alone. Hell, he might have come to the same conclusion you just did. He might be bored out of his skull. But I'd really rather just let sleeping dogs lie. Maybe someday we could go take a look. Send a peace envoy, maybe. But we don't need someone going over there right now and maybe stirring up a hornet's nest."

"You think she might do that?"

Cherry nodded. "It is a bit personal for her, remember? They were practically ready to get married, for heaven's sake."

Wilder thought for a moment. "Look, what's the worst that could happen if she does go over there? Like you said, it's personal. If she does make him angry he's most likely to take it out on her. Why would he come after us?"

"I don't know," Cherry replied heavily. "What you say makes sense. But Harry isn't rational. I'm not

sure we can count on him to do what makes sense."

"So, what are you going to do? Confine her?"

"Uh-uh," Cherry answered. "Besides, how could I? She'd just do something to get out. Sure, I know we've got an agreement, but you know as well as I do that the first time someone really ticks someone else off we're going to have trouble. Part of what makes it work is simply that we agreed to leave each other alone."

Padre Don aimed carefully and tossed his trowel point first into the ground with a soft thud. Then he wiped his hands. Cherry noted blood on Wilder's left thumb. "I'll talk to her," the Padre said. "Maybe I can talk some sense into her."

"Yeah, do," Cherry said. "You're a bit older and she does seem to respect you."

"I'm a scientist," Wilder replied simply.

"Yeah, she does respect that." He peered more closely. "Looks like you cut your thumb. Why not just... well... you know. Heal it."

Wilder smiled and shook his head. "Doesn't work."

"Hunh?"

"It doesn't work. Remember when we said that there must be limitations to what we can do? Well, that's one of them. You can't do anything to yourself."

"But I put my clothes back on after Lisa made me naked."

"That was your clothes, not your body. You can't do anything to your own flesh, living or dead. Which means you can't even give yourself a haircut."

"Can we do things to each other?"

Wilder shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't tried it."

Cherry indicated his injured hand. "Want me to try?"

Wilder frowned. "I'm not sure I'd trust you. No," he added, seeing Cherry's expression, "not your intent. It's just that you aren't a medical scientist."

"Okay," Cherry said. "But let me at least try a little experiment. Hold out your arm."

Wilder did, looking puzzled. "What are you thinking—" He stopped as an area of arm hairs nearly a centimeter across suddenly vanished.

Cherry looked up, triumphant. "I remembered that hair is dead tissue. I figured I couldn't do any harm if I just 'shaved your arm' a bit."

Wilder looked at Cherry with an unreadable expression. "Very well. However, I would appreciate it if you refrain from 'experimenting' on my body from now on. And I imagine the others feel the same

way."

Cherry held his hands up, palms outward. "Okay, okay. Won't happen again."

Now Wilder smiled again. "Thanks. Sorry if I got a bit upset. It's just personal."

"Yeah." Cherry frowned, his thoughts jerked back to the original subject. "Look, keep an eye out for Lisa, okay? And like you said, talk to her if you get the chance."

Wilder nodded, and Cherry turned and headed off to his own cabin, leaving the ex-priest to putter around in his garden.

* * *

Lisa came back four days later.

Nobody saw her until she was inside the compound. The first one who did was Rod Orland, who was out taking a stroll just for the pure fun of it. He was ambling along a path, humming a tune, when he noticed a figure staggering up from the direction of the gate. He stopped, peered closer, then let out a yell.

Fifteen minutes later, the entire mini-colony was gathered around Lisa. Or rather, around what used to be Lisa. She was stark naked, and filthy from spending two days wandering around in the wilderness. From the neck down she was normal; a very attractive young woman with a fine figure. But above the neck...

Her head had been turned into the head of a pig.

She could not speak; she could only grunt and snort. She seemed to recognize everyone, but that was about all. She darted around in spurts, and from time to time got down on all fours and pawed the ground. Then she would stop, cock her pig head to one side, and stand up again. When she saw Cherry she went up to him and placed a hesitant hand on his face. Then she squealed and darted away.

"It makes sense," Don Wilder murmured next to Cherry.

"What makes sense?" Cherry snapped. He was angry.

"If Harry gave her a pig's head he probably gave her a pig's brain. I'm surprised she recognizes us as much as she does."

Cherry swore viciously. "Sorry, Padre," he added. "But this is going too far. I don't know what the devil she did, but she didn't deserve this." He paused, clenching his fists. "That used to be a beautiful, intelligent young woman. Now she's some kind of freak! It's worse than killing her."

Wilder sighed. "You're probably right. But there's nothing we can do about it."

"The devil we can't," Cherry growled. "Just watch."

At that Wilder held out a restraining arm. "Captain, don't. Remember what we talked about?"

Cherry whirled around. "You want me to just leave her like that?"

Wilder held up his hands. "No, I don't mean that. I'm just saying we should stop and think it through."

"Think what through?" Cherry demanded. "Yeah, I remember what we talked about. You're going to say I don't know enough medical science to do the job right. Well, neither do you. Nor anyone here. We could wait until this place freezes over and it won't make a bit of difference. I'm willing to take a chance." He paused. "Besides, I've got an idea."

"What are you talking about—?" Wilder began, but Cherry had already turned away. He started to say something else, but Rod Orland gave him an unfriendly glare. Then everyone's attention focused on the pig-headed woman that had once been Lisa Miller.

Captain Cherry closed his eyes in concentration, breathing in and out slowly. Nobody spoke. Then, in a transition so swift that nobody saw it the pig head was gone, and Lisa was once again a beautiful young woman.

Cherry started to turn to say something to Wilder when Lisa gave a shriek. "No!" she yelled. "Please!" She collapsed to the ground, her legs bicycling frantically in the air. She clawed herself like a dog desperately trying to rid itself of fleas. Then, as everyone's eyes widened in horror, she began to change. Within a minute, the transformation was complete

Cherry felt his gorge rise as he stared at the frightful monstrosity that had once been a beautiful young woman. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ben Orland bent over, throwing up. Don Wilder was standing next to him, a sick expression on his face.

She was still alive. Whatever internal wreckage the transformation had done to her, it hadn't yet killed her. Her tentacles were trembling and her mandibles were working as she tried to speak. Then, Cherry nearly lost it as something horribly repulsive emerged from her open mouth. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate, fighting his visceral reactions. Concentrate... Concentrate...

A muffled gasp made him open his eyes. Lisa still lay in the middle of the gathered circle, but she was no longer a mutant freak. Once again, she was a beautiful young woman. Cherry let his breath out in a massive sigh of relief.

Lisa did not move. Cherry stepped forward and knelt beside her. "Lisa," he called softly. "It's okay. You're okay now." He reached out and took her hand. It lay limp in his grasp. He felt her wrist. There was no pulse.

He bowed his head. "Please, no," he murmured. "I did it right." Off to one side he heard someone say something, then a muffled sob. Don Wilder came over and knelt down opposite Cherry.

"She's gone, Jim," he said, softly. It was the first time Wilder had ever used Cherry's given name.

"But I did everything right," Cherry protested. "I didn't try to heal her. I just tried to undo whatever else had been done. She should be alive. I can't accept this." Once again, he bowed his head and concentrated.

Nothing happened. Lisa continued to lie on the ground, dead, unmoving. Cherry felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Jim. Captain. There's nothing we can do."

Cherry shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"I'm afraid that bringing back the dead is one more of those things beyond even our new abilities. There's only One who can bring back the dead, and He doesn't do it very often."

"Don't give me that religious claptrap," Cherry snarled. But he still didn't do anything. Wilder sighed and stood up. The others gathered around him, all staring down at Lisa's inert form.

"We'll be in the meeting hall when you're ready," Wilder said. With that, he turned and walked away.

* * *

"I swear I got to her in time."

Padre Don didn't respond. Cherry looked at him, half-expecting something, then lowered his eyes again.

"Now you're going to tell me I screwed up."

At that, Wilder's head came up. "No, actually I don't think you did."

"What do you mean?"

Wilder paused, as if searching for words. "The more I think about it," he finally said, "the more I am convinced that it was some sort of 'booby trap'. I mean, I believe that Harry did something to her so that when you undid one thing, it triggered something else."

Cherry looked at him aghast. "What are you talking about? You mean, like, he put some kind of delayed reaction program in her, like a virus or something, that activated when I got rid of the pig head?"

Wilder nodded. "Something like that. And yes, I believe it was deliberate."

"That rust-eaten mutant," he growled. "And when she died?"

Wilder shrugged. "In that case, you probably were too late. No," he added when he saw Cherry's expression, "you didn't hesitate too long. The truth is that the shock to her system was probably so great that nothing anyone did could have saved her. No, it was whatever he did to her that killed her."

Cherry swore softly and viciously. This time he didn't apologize to Wilder. "You know," he said, "I was willing to just let things go. But this..." He shook his head. "We've talked about acting like humans or animals with all this... this magic. Well, Harry's one animal I'd like to put in a cage for a long, long time."

"I understand how you feel," Wilder said quietly. "But you might have a problem actually doing it."

"Well, if he does do something, he won't be alone."

Both men turned to see Rod Orland standing behind them.

"I've been listening," Rod said. "Padre, sometimes I don't think you really understand some things. This

dude Harry trashed one of our people. In a particularly nasty way, too. Yeah, it'll be hard. But we gotta try, or we ain't men."

"Thanks, Rod," Cherry said. "How do the others feel?"

"Captain, if you say let's go teach Harry a lesson, we're all right behind you. Lisa was our friend, too."

Cherry turned to Wilder. "You see, Padre? I'm not the only one."

Wilder sighed heavily. "Yes, I see. Okay, just what do you propose to do?"

"I say we go turn Mr. King Harry Jacobs the First into a toadstool," Rod stated flatly.

Cherry seemed to consider the idea. "Well," he said at last, "maybe I wouldn't go so far as to do that, but I do agree we've got to do something. Otherwise, which one of us is next?"

"Amen," Rod affirmed heartily. "I sure don't want to have no pig's head. Or get turned into... whatever that was." He grimaced at the memory.

"Have either of you considered that this probably would never have happened if Lisa hadn't gone back to Harry's camp herself?" Wilder explained patiently.

"So what?" Rod exploded. "You just don't do something like that to a person!"

Nobody said anything for a minute. Finally, Wilder broke the silence. "Like I said, I understand how you feel. But let me tell you what will happen if you go over there. You seem to be forgetting that Harry has just as much of this power as you have. So do his followers, I'm sure. What's going to happen will be a particularly nasty war. And given the anger I've been hearing from you, it could end up killing us all. Is that what you want?"

"But—" Rod tried to interrupt. Wilder overrode him.

"'But' nothing. Do you remember why we made our little agreement here? With this power we've got to have civilized behavior. Otherwise we'll end up fighting like a pack of wild dogs and killing each other off. What you're talking about is exactly the kind of thing we are trying to avoid."

Rod balled a fist. "Don't give me that self-righteous garbage, Padre!" he snarled. "You talk about wild dogs. Well, like the captain here once said, you shoot a mad dog. And Harry's a mad dog."

Wilder did not react. Instead, he simply continued to gaze at Rod. "In other words," he said, "you think with your feelings instead of reason. How does that make you any better than Harry?"

Rod growled and drew back his fist to slug Wilder. Cherry hastily stepped between the two men.

"That's enough, Rod," he snapped. Turning to Wilder he said, "You seem to forget that feelings are a very real part of us. Sometimes we've got to go with them."

Wilder's expression drooped and he stepped back, head lowered. "Then may the Lord have mercy on us all," he murmured.

The rainforest had changed.

It had been dark before, but it had been a good kind of dark. A green darkness that spoke of trees and rich growth. A friendly dark. Now, it was different.

A heaviness brooded over the trees, and shadows lengthened. Instead of the quiet of the deep forest, broken only by the sighing of wind in the branches and the twittering of birds and insects, strange cries echoed in the deep wood. It was no longer friendly.

James Cherry tried to ignore the prickling sensations that crawled over his skin as he led his little group through the forest. The paths were unchanged; he still knew his way around from the weeks he had spent hiking here. He was tempted to put forth his will and transform things back. Later, he kept reminding himself. First things first.

They had first encountered the brooding darkness when they entered the forest. Before that, the plains to the north had been unaltered. Cherry was positive that the change was there as a warning to anyone coming that they were entering unfriendly territory.

He called a halt. They were close to the edge near the original compound, in the very clearing, in fact, where he had had his discussion with Lisa Miller a few weeks and a whole lifetime ago. The logs were still there. Cherry started toward one, then some inner warning sense told him not to sit down. He noticed that none of the others sat, either.

"Telepathy?"

Cherry shrugged. "Maybe a low grade subliminal warning," he told the Padre.

Wilder looked around at the brooding darkness and Cherry saw him give a tiny shudder. "We're close," he murmured. "Very close."

Cherry laughed without mirth. "So you feel it, too, huh?"

Wilder nodded. "Impossible not to," he replied.

Cherry folded his arms across his chest. "So do you still think this is a mistake? Look around. This man is sick."

"I agree. But I still think it's a mistake."

Cherry let out his breath and shook his head. "I just don't get you," he said. "You, of all people, I would expect to have some kind of sense of right and wrong. I don't go to church, but even I can see that this is evil. I don't get it. Why don't you want to just blow Harry away?"

Wilder gazed sadly at Cherry. "Is that the answer?" he asked softly.

"What would you do?" Cherry demanded.

"To tell the truth," Wilder replied, "in this situation, I don't think there's much I could do. If we had a real authority structure, I would probably want to see him arrested and tried for murder."

"I'm still the captain," Cherry stated flatly.

"Not everyone agrees with you," Wilder returned. "Sure, I do. And I think everyone here does. Or, at least, they respect your authority. But you don't have any power to back it up."

Cherry glared at him. "Would you care to see just how much power I've got?"

"You don't have any more than anyone else," Wilder said softly.

"Then what—"

"Given time, I suppose we might be able to come up with some kind of structure that would work," Wilder went on. "But, right now, we don't have anything. That's why I object to this expedition of yours. What if Harry decides to fight?"

"I hope he does," Cherry growled.

"I don't think you truly realize what that would mean," Wilder said.

Cherry's jaw clenched. "You really think that? You really think I'm that stupid? Listen to me, mister, because I'm only going to say this once. Yeah, I know what will probably happen. But the fact of the matter is that I just don't care. Maybe I'll get the jump on him and win. Maybe I won't. But I've got to try."

"So revenge is more important than common sense."

"So what if it is?" Cherry demanded. "Look, you said it. There aren't any authorities here. We're it. So if we here don't do something about Harry, nobody will." He paused. "Maybe that's too much for you to understand. Maybe it's too human."

"Oh, I understand all right," Wilder said. "I understand completely. I had hoped that we could act like civilized people here and put our evil nature behind us. I guess I was expecting too much. Looks like we're nothing but a bunch of dumb animals after all. I hope the aliens enjoy the show." He turned and stalked over to the other side of the clearing.

Rod Orland stamped over to where the Padre was standing by himself and made a vicious face.

"Grrrrr!" he said, baring his teeth. "I don't care what you call it," he added. "I'm gonna rip Harry's liver out and stuff it down his throat for what he did to Lisa. Got that, dude?" He turned to the others. "Hey, let's go!" Cries of agreement arose.

Cherry, at least, still retained the dignity of command. "Okay, people, you know what to do," he said. "Like Rod said, let's go." With that, he started down the final section of trail.

The last five hundred meters went by quickly, and soon Cherry and his company were peering out through the trees at the place where the compound had once stood. It was gone. Instead, they all stared somberly at a huge, black fortress, reminiscent of something out of a gothic horror show. Red lights gleamed evilly in dozens of windows like watchful, baleful eyes. Nobody spoke.

Cherry glanced back briefly at Wilder, standing behind the rest of the company. Probably thinks I've gone off the deep end. Sanity. Insanity. It didn't matter if he was crazy as a loon. After all, what did they have to look forward to, even if they didn't end up blowing themselves to smithereens? A life in

captivity, as zoo animals for some incomprehensible alien keepers? Laboratory rats?

"There's nobody out there," Rod finally whispered. "Looks like they're all inside that... haunted house."

Cherry smiled. "Probably overconfident. Still," he added, "let's don't do anything rash. We go down there quietly."

They crept forward quietly. It was pitch dark, even though the sun was still a couple of hours from setting. They passed huge, ugly, thorn bushes and twisted, evil looking trees. Wilder had once described his own personal vision of Hell, and what Cherry was seeing looked like a good candidate for the real thing.

He paused next to a monolithic black boulder, and Rod came up beside him. "See?" he said. "What did I tell you? Piece of cake." He looked thoughtful. "Maybe we should do our thing now. You know, turn that house of horrors into an anthill or something."

"Maybe," Cherry said. "But I still want to see Harry face to face. I want to see his face when I turn his guts into a lump of burning sulfur."

Rod grinned. "Hey, that'd be real cool, Captain—" he began. He never finished.

The scene around them vanished. Suddenly, they were standing on a flat circular floor some hundred meters in diameter. On all sides rose tiers of seats, like an amphitheater. In those seats, shapes, hideous and inhuman crouched, eagerly slaving. Cherry and his followers stared in shock.

Directly in front of them, a door opened. A figure, dressed in a midnight black robe and crowned with a sable helmet, walked out. As the figure approached, a beam of light fell on its face.

"Welcome to Judgment Day, Captain," Harry Jacobs said scornfully.

All around, the creatures leaned forward in rapt expectation.

* * *

"So what's the matter, Captain Cherry?" Jacobs sneered. "I thought you were going to turn my guts into a lump of burning sulfur?" He grinned. "Go ahead. What are you waiting for?"

Cherry glared at him. "An explanation," he grated. "I'd just like to know why you did what you did to Lisa." Behind him, he heard Rod Orland mutter something.

Jacobs looked at him in mock sorrow. "Why, I didn't do anything to her, Captain. She did it to herself. All I did was to help her find her true nature."

Cherry continued to glare. "Her 'true nature', huh? I thought you used to love her."

Jacobs spread his hands theatrically. "Love her? Of course I loved her! I love all these people." He indicated the crowd of freaks in the stands. "Don't you? After all, you're their captain," he added scornfully.

These people? Cherry looked around at the gathered multitude. Were these all that were left of the crew? A fresh sense of horror swept through him. "Is this everyone else?" he demanded. "The ones

who stayed behind with you?" His voice rose. "What did you do to them, you animal?" Growls and other, indescribable sounds rose from the creatures.

"Animal?" Jacobs shot back in pretended indignation. "Of course I'm an animal! Aren't we all? Animals in some huge, inhuman zoo! Freaks on display so that some bug-eyed, tentacular mass of slime can be amused at our antics! Are you surprised?"

"I thought you wanted to get out of here," Cherry said.

At that, Jacobs jerked himself erect. A frightening light gleamed in his eyes. "Get out of here? Of course I do! You fool! Did you think this is fun?" His voice dropped conspiratorially. "Can't be done. We tried. It can't be done. They've won. And now we're all nice, happy little creatures, running around for their amusement." He tittered. "How about you, Captain? Are you ready to meet your own inner nature? And how about you, Padre? Or do you think you're some kind of angel. Hot line direct to God Himself, huh? How's it feel to be abandoned? Left to rot in some stinking cage halfway across the galaxy. Huh?"

Wilder stepped forward. Cherry started to hold out a hand to stop him, then changed his mind. Wilder stopped at Cherry's side.

"Listen to me, Harry," he said. "It doesn't matter what our condition is. We're still made in God's image. You can act like an animal, but that doesn't make you one."

At that, Harry's face twisted in rage. "'God's image'?" he roared. "Would you like to see the real image of your so-called 'God'? Behold!"

Harry seemed to expand, suddenly looming over Cherry and Wilder and the rest of their company. His visage contorted into a hideous mockery, a leering demon face full of hatred and bitterness. "I am the Lord God Almighty!" he shouted. "Get on your knees and worship me!"

Cherry cringed and stepped back, but Wilder remained unmoved. He gazed calmly at the raging figure. "Give it up, Harry," he said softly. "You can only come to a bad end."

Harry's expression darkened and his eyes glowed red. He glared venomously at the Padre. "You refuse me?" he hissed. His voice rose to a shriek. "Then die!" With that, a pair of brilliant, crackling bolts of lightning shot from his eyes and impaled Wilder. "Go meet your so-called 'God'!"

Wilder was hurled backward, bowling over the rest of Cherry's companions and slamming into the back wall of the arena. For a period that seemed like an eternity, but was actually only about five seconds, the lightning bolts held him in their violent grip. Then, they vanished. Smoke curling up from his body, Wilder slid to the floor in a limp heap. Barks and yelps of excitement rose from the crowd of mutants.

Stunned, Cherry walked slowly over to where Wilder's body lay. He crouched down, putting out a hesitant hand. The Padre lay very still. His eyes were wide open, staring sightlessly at whatever inner vision he had beheld in his last instants of life. Curiously, his face bore a peaceful expression. Cherry rose and turned back toward Jacobs.

He was no longer huge and menacing. Yet, his eyes still glowed with vast, banked power. He looked at Cherry with curious contempt. "What's the matter, Captain?" he asked softly, mockingly. "Have you

lost your high priest?"

Cherry glared at him. "It's not that," he grated.

"What then?" the soothing, mocking voice continued. "You mean you didn't believe him?"

"No," Cherry replied shortly, then hesitated. "I mean, I don't know. Maybe he was right. It doesn't matter."

"Then what does matter?"

Cherry took a step toward him, finally allowing his face to twist with rage. "What does matter is that you killed one of my crew!" he shouted. "He was a far better man than you'll ever be! And Lisa..." He stopped, choked for a moment. "You didn't deserve Lisa. The only thing you deserve is to die."

Harry's lip curled into a sneer. "I deserve to die, Captain? I suppose you would like to do the honors. Go ahead," he added. "Kill me. Prove you're no better than you claim I am." He stood, hands on hips, his very posture a dare.

Cherry stopped. His mind flashed back to his earlier conversation with Wilder. He could still hear the former priest telling him, So, you think with your feelings instead of reason. How does that make you any better than Harry?

Was that the issue?

Was he just an irrational animal, something that reacted when pushed by slashing out at its tormentor?

Or was there something more?

What was man's true nature?

For what seemed like an age he stood unmoving, looking at Harry. I could end this, he thought. I could end it right here and now, just by walking out. I believe I've got enough of the power to at least protect myself and the others as we leave. And if not, Harry would surely be perfectly happy to roll on the floor laughing his head off at my weakness as I crawl out of his sight.

No.

Inside Cherry, something rose and swelled. Something beyond reason or logic. Something as wild and primal as a scream of rage. Maybe it was the beast still living within the heart of man. Maybe it was what Don Wilder called "man's evil, sinful nature". Maybe it was something completely different, something as of yet indescribable, yet so integral a part of human nature that it could not be ignored. The point was that it didn't matter.

It didn't matter.

It didn't matter.

IT DIDN'T MATTER.

With a terrible cry, James Cherry hurled himself at Harry Jacobs.

The next instant, the world vanished in a maelstrom of light and dark, heat and cold, indescribable noise, and things perceived only by senses as of yet unimagined.

Epilogue

In the vast, empty expanse of space, something rippled and flowed. If there had been humans present, they would not have seen it, for it rippled and flowed on a level imperceptible by their senses. Now it swirled, hesitated, then seemed to scatter itself in a myriad of pulsing points.

A feeble trickle of consciousness flickered, disorganized and dying. Once upon a time it had called itself James Cherry. Once upon a time it had been a human being, a starship commander and explorer. It had been born, grown up, learned to love—and to hate.

The part that had learned to hate had also learned to rejoice in triumph over its foes.

But what price triumph?

The flicker of consciousness recalled some of the enemies it had faced in its life. Now, one more enemy was gone, vanquished.

But was that all that life was?

Was that all that human beings were?

Could I have done better...?

Done better...

Better...

The dim shred of consciousness flickered once more, then guttered and went out.